Dynamics of Urban Multilingualism: The Case of Timișoara-Temesvár

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Abstract

This paper offers an empirical case study of the current sociolinguistic situation of ethnic minorities in and around Timișoara, the capital of the historical Banat region in modern Romania, located at the intersection of Hungary and Serbia. The study is based on data and material collected in March 2023 from representatives of the Hungarian, German, Serbian, and Slovak minorities in both Timișoara city and nearby rural areas, with a particular focus on young speakers. These communities have experienced significant demographic decline due to emigration and assimilation, leading to a decrease in both absolute numbers and relative proportions. However, despite these challenges, each minority group retains a resilient core, supported by cultural institutions such as schools, which facilitate the intergenerational transmission of ethnic heritage languages.

Exploring ongoing language shift processes within the local minority communities, the study reveals a transition from historically rich patterns of multilingualism to predominant bilingualism in Romanian. Additionally, a new dimension of trilingualism is emerging, as English increasingly serves as an intercultural and global language. This linguistic shift is analysed within the broader framework of urban multilingualism, in which linguistic diversity shapes social relations, cultural belonging, and identity in urban settings.

By focusing on language transmission and use across generations, this study provides insights into the future prospects of language vitality and maintenance within the ethnic and linguistic groups in Timișoara and the Banat region. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for assessing the sustainability of regional linguistic diversity and cultural heritage in a rapidly

changing sociocultural landscape. The findings contribute to broader discussions on language policies, identity, and minority rights in multilingual societies. Moreover, by focusing on young speakers, this study highlights linguistic trends that are increasingly characteristic of border regions across Europe, where multiple linguistic influences interact and evolve in response to both local and global pressures.

Keywords: ethnography of language, linguistic identity, border regions, globalization, Romania

INTRODUCTION

The city of Timișoara is an illustrative example of the turbulent history of eastern Central Europe and the Balkans, as well as of the drastic political changes that have taken place following World War I (Kókai, 2020). Today Timișoara, the capital of Timiș County, western Romania, is also the centre of the historical Banat region (*Bánság*), located in the southeastern part of the Carpathian basin at the junction of Romania, Serbia, and Hungary (Neumann, 2019b). With c. 251,000 inhabitants (2021) and an additional 110,000 in the surrounding metropolitan region, Timișoara is the third largest city of Romania and the location of a large number of important historical sites, educational institutions, and industrial enterprises. In the late Middle Ages, the city was ruled as a part of the Kingdom of Hungary (1212–1526), also serving briefly as the Hungarian royal capital (1316–1323). After a period of Ottoman rule (1552–1716), it was acquired by the Habsburgs, under whom it belonged variously to Austria (1718–1779, 1849–1867), Hungary (1779–1849), and, finally, the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1867–1918). After an interlude under the independent Banat Republic (1918), followed by a brief episode of Serbian rule (1918–1919), Timișoara was incorporated into Romania in 1920 (Bjelica, 2019).

Complex historical developments have constantly shaped the ethnic and linguistic composition of the urban population of Timișoara. Conquests and migrations have repeatedly brought in new elements, increasing the role of some at the expense of others, and with social and linguistic changes as a result (Ilieșu, 2016; Balázs, 2021). The function of the dominant language in the region has been filled variously by Hungarian, German, Serbian, and Turkish, to be replaced by Romanian in the 20th century. While there remain few linguistic traces of the historical Ottoman presence in Timișoara today, Hungarian, German, and Serbian are still spoken in the city, though only by declining minorities. The city has also official names in these three languages: *Temesvár* in Hungarian, *Temeswar* or *Temeschwar* (earlier also *Temeschburg*) in German, and *Temišvar* (*Темишвар*) in Serbian. This name is of a Hungarian origin, with Hungarian *-vár* 'castle, city', combined with the name of the nearby river Timiș, Hungarian *Temes*, German *Temesch*, Serbian *Tamiš* (*Тамиш*), itself an ancient hydronym of prehistorical origin. Strictly speaking, the city lies on a different river, today named Bega, but earlier known in Hungarian as *Kistemes* 'Little Temes'.

Both the city of Timișoara and the immediately surrounding Banat region constitute the most multilingual part of Romania (Basarabă, 1999; Sorescu-Marinković & Salamurović, 2023). Apart from the historically dominant languages, there are also other languages that have been spoken here for centuries already, including, in particular, Slovak and Bulgarian, as well as Roma. As of today, Yiddish, once spoken by a substantial proportion of the urban population, has more or less disappeared. German is, however, present also in non-standard forms, notably dialects of the Swabian (*Schwäbisch*) type. More recently, the linguistic and ethnic diversity of the city has increased due to new migrant groups and individuals. Against this multiethnic and multilingual background, it was no accident that

Timișoara was selected to be one of the European Capitals of Culture in 2023. Its heritage of urban diversity was also the reason why Timișoara was chosen as the target of the present study, which aims to assess the current sociolinguistic situation of ethnic groups traditionally present in the city. This study is based on the analysis of the data gathered during a field trip in March 2023, which include interviews and recordings from representatives of the Hungarian, Serbian, German, and Slovak minorities. Outside of Timișoara city, the Slovak minority was studied also in the rural town of Nădlac (Slovak *Nadlak*) in Arad County on the border with Hungary.

The linguistic situation of Timișoara calls for an historical-ethnographic approach within the framework of urban multilingualism with a focus on how 'identity' is negotiated in an ethnically and linguistically diverse border region at the level of individuals, families, and communities (Watt & Llamas, 2014). Unfortunately, the general picture of Timișoara today is one of declining diversity. In the early 1990s, the city population reached the all-time high of 334,000 (1994), but in the following decades the population decreased by almost a quarter. Much of this decline is connected to emigration, which has particularly affected the minorities. However, for research on urban multilingualism, the phenomenon of declining diversity presents an opportunity for a rather understudied perspective on the issue of 'the city as a process and experience' (Smakman & Heinrich, 2017), which has more frequently been studied in view of recent immigration and increasing diversity. In the following sections, the present-day sociolinguistic status and multilingual patterns of the principal 'old' minority groups of Timișoara and surrounding areas are described in more detail. One potentially important minority that remains outside of this study is the Roma, who are possibly the single most multilingual ethnic group in Romania, but who are also inherently difficult to approach for short-term field work, and who, because of their high mobility, are less concentrated in the Banat region than the other groups.

Apart from the on-the-spot observations concerning the local linguistic environment and landscape, the bulk of the data for this study was collected using anonymous questionnaires distributed via available contact networks to speakers of the different minority languages. The questionnaires were provided, and the answers received in online format (*Google Forms*), and the information thus obtained was complemented by a number of in-depth personal interviews and recordings. The principal target groups were school children of various ages, as well as university students, but interviews were also received from teachers and other members of the adult society. The questionnaires were based on a model created for this particular purpose in English and then translated into Hungarian, Serbian, Slovak, and Romanian, which, as well as German, were also the languages used in the oral interviews. Due to the differences between the ethnic and linguistic groups, some variation was inevitable from language to language in the type and content of the questions, but typically each questionnaire contained c. 100 questions, most of which were of the multiple-choice type. The questions concerned the language attitudes and self-assessed language skills of the respondents in relation to their ethnic and linguistic background. The self-assessment of language skills was made according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), concerning which the respondents had received the necessary instructions in advance.[1]

HUNGARIAN

Hungarian has been present in Timișoara since the Middle Ages, and towards the end of the Austro-Hungarian period its status grew only

[1] For access to sample questionnaires, see the links at the end of this paper.

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stronger, though, at the same time, there was widespread bilateral bilingualism in Hungarian and German. In 1920, there were c. 27,000 ethnic Hungarians in the city, and during the following decades the absolute number still continued to grow until it reached c. 37,000 in 1977. In the same period, however, due to intensive urbanization and immigration from elsewhere in Romania, the relative proportion of Hungarians in the city declined from 31% to 14%. Subsequently, the decline has continued both in absolute and relative terms, leaving today a residual population of only c. 8300 individuals (2021), or c. 3.3% of the total urban population.[2] Even so, Hungarian remains the most widely spoken minority language of Timișoara, and its presence in the city is supported by several institutions, including, perhaps most importantly, the externally funded 'Hungarian House' (*Magyar Ház*), recently under restoration and expansion, which functions as a cultural centre and houses also a Hungarian honorary consulate. Another centre of cultural activities is the state-funded 'Hungarian Theatre' (*Csiky Gergely Állami Magyar Színház*), which regularly presents plays and performances in Hungarian and has garnered attention also outside of the Banat region. There are also many locally produced publications in Hungarian, including a weekly newspaper (*Heti Új Szó*).

A key role for the continuity of the Hungarian language in Timișoara is played by two Hungarian schools, the Catholic Lyceum with a religious orientation (*Római Katolikus Teológiai Líceum*) and the secular Béla Bartók Lyceum (*Bartók Béla Elméleti Líceum*). The latter is the largest public school in the city with Hungarian as the primary language of instruction. The school has 53 teachers and c. 600 students, including 3 kindergarten classes, 10 primary classes, 8 junior classes, and 11 high school classes. While the school operates under a Romanian state-mandated curriculum, focus on Hungarian language and cultural preservation is highly valued and prioritized. As a part of the present study, sociolinguistic information was collected from the students of the Béla Bartók Lyceum with the help of an anonymous questionnaire as well as interviews. The aim was to get an understanding of how individual speakers see the connection between language and ethnic identity, what strategies they use when navigating their multilingual environments, and what the general social significance of language use and language attitudes is within the community.

The questionnaire was distributed to students in online form. A total of 114 respondents replied to the call, of whom 68 were males, 43 females, and 3 undisclosed. The average age of the respondents was 17 years. Virtually all of them had local roots, being born either in Timișoara (83%) or elsewhere in Romania (14%), and with parents and grandparents from Romania (99%). There were 119 questions in total, mainly focused on the use of the Hungarian language in different contexts and domains. Although the answers were self-reported, they provide insights into the perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs about language use. As could be expected, the answers concerning 'mother tongue' exhibited some dispersion, with 72 respondents reporting Hungarian, 4 Romanian, and 38 both Hungarian and Romanian as their 'mother tongues'. This correlates with the respondents' self-assessment of their language skills, in that almost 70% reported their CEFR level of Hungarian to be C2 ('mother tongue'), while about 11% reported level C1 ('near mother tongue' or 'fluent'). Proficiency levels in Romanian, by contrast, show much more variation, divided between C2 (28%), C1 (18%), B2 (12%), B1 (11%), A2 (21%), and A1 (10%).

It is obvious that the language skills of the students reflect the linguistic background of their parents, but also the impact of their social environment. Although mixed marriages between Hungarian and Romanian speakers are

[2] On the statistical sources used for the present study, see the note at the end of this paper.

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increasingly common, 57% of the respondents reported Hungarian-only communication with parents, while 41% reported using both Hungarian and Romanian, and only 2% reported Romanian-only communication. In interaction with friends, Romanian has a stronger position, with 27% reporting Hungarian-only and 5% Romanian only communication against 68% who reported using both Hungarian and Romanian. As an apparent sign of increasing internationalization, the respondents also mentioned English and/or French as additional languages in 8% of parental and 16% of friendship relationships. A related question concerned the respondents' intention of passing on Hungarian to their own children in the future. As many as 94% answered positively, suggesting that Hungarian is strongly linked to their identity, and continued membership in the ethnic community via language use is highly valued.

While the answers received from the respondents show a firm commitment to the Hungarian language, there is no corresponding feeling of affinity with the Hungarian state. Although occasional visits to Hungary are easy because of the geographical closeness of the border, and many respondents have relatives in Hungary, the social and political interests of the respondents are connected with Romania or, more narrowly, with the Banat region. On a scale from 1 (strongest) to 5 (weakest), only 18% of the respondents reported a strong interest (1) in what happens in Hungary (events, news, etc.), while 50% reported no or almost no interest at all (4–5). At the same time, 65% of the respondents believed that the Hungarian language plays a very important part in their lives (1), with 42% also considering knowledge of Hungarian an important resource for the future (1). On the lower part of the scale (4–5), only 11–14% do not see much value in Hungarian and do not consider it as a significant resource for the future. Even so, the answers suggest that Hungarian is gradually being restricted to the personal sphere of family and friends, while the key to advancement in life is provided by Romanian and English.

It has to be noted that the Hungarians in the Banat region are historically separate from the much more substantial ethnic Hungarian populations elsewhere in Romania, especially in Transylvania (*Erdély*), where a similar bilingualism in Hungarian and Romanian is observed (Ganea, 2020). The Hungarian spoken in the Banat region belongs to the context of the south-lowland (*dél-alföldi*) regional dialect, and dialectal features (such as, for instance, the rounding of *ë* to *ö*) are still encountered in the speech of individuals with ties to the countryside. The language spoken in Timișoara and taught at schools is, however, essentially identical with standard Hungarian. The main concern of the respondents with regard to language was the frequent 'mixing' of 'proper Hungarian' with Romanian, which takes place both by lexical borrowing and code switching. Multilingual practices are common and acceptable in many domains, and Romanian is the language used most often by Hungarian speakers in the streets, in the library, with neighbours, and in stores. Apart from the schools and some churches, there are very few public places where a Hungarian speaker can use his/her mother tongue as the default language to address a stranger.

GERMAN, INCLUDING SWABIAN

The presence of the German language in Timișoara dates back to the defeat of the Ottomans in the Austro-Turkish war (1716–1718), after which German was introduced as the new administrative language. Its position was strengthened by a policy that actively encouraged colonization of the newly acquired territories with German-speaking settlers from all over the Holy Roman Empire, but mainly from the central and southwestern parts of Germany. The colonization took place in three waves (Carolinian, Theresian, and Josephine) in the course of the 18th century

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(Varga, 1999) and resulted in the formation of a new regional German-speaking population with an internally heterogeneous spoken language based on the Swabian, Bavarian, Franconian, and Hessian dialects. Since most of the first settlers came from Württemberg and Swabia, this population has become known as the 'Banat Swabians' (*Banater Schwaben*), although, strictly speaking, the initial settlers from Swabia, decimated by an outbreak of the plague in the 18th century, moved further towards the Crimea and Transcaucasia, after which they were replaced by new settlers from Bavaria and Franconia.

The varieties of 'Swabian' spoken in the Banat region appear to be largely derived from the Moselle-Franconian branch of the West Central German sub-branch of Western Germanic (Gehl, 1987). Incidentally, there is also another German-speaking population in Romania, the Transylvanian 'Saxons', whose ancestors came from approximately the same source region, though their migration started much earlier, in the 12th century. However, especially during the decades of the Austrian Empire (1804–1867), the German language also spread to Timișoara in more standard (Austrian) forms. As a result, German speakers were divided into those speaking Swabian dialects, especially in rural environments, and those speaking 'high' varieties close to Standard German, especially in the city itself. The position of Standard German as the dominant urban form of the language was further enhanced by the school system, and it was also the variety learnt as a second language by local Hungarian speakers. With increasing urbanization and the generally decreasing numbers of German speakers in the Banat region, the standard language has as of today largely replaced Swabian (cf. also Gehl, 1997).

In the last decades of the Austro-Hungarian empire, Germans were listed as by far the largest ethnic group in Timișoara, numbering c. 31,000 in 1900, as compared with c. 19,000 Hungarians, 6300 Romanians, and 2700 Serbs. By 1930, however, the balance between Germans and Hungarians had become statistically almost equalized, with c. 33,000 Germans and 32,000 Hungarians, one reason being that many bilingual German speakers preferred to report Hungarian as their ethnic identity in a semi-voluntary process also known as 'Magyarization' (Lupaș, 1992). However, the economic crisis of the 1930s drove many German-speaking inhabitants to the United States, whereas after World War II a large proportion of Germans in all parts of Romania were forcibly relocated to the Ukraine or other regions in the Soviet Union (Dărăban, 1999). A particularly sharp decline in the urban German-speaking population started in the 1990s, with their number dropping from 13,000 in 1992 to just 2200, or a mere 0,87% of the total urban population, in 2021. This decline was due to emigration *en masse* to Germany and other German-speaking countries. It may also be assumed that the former Jewish community in Timișoara, of whom many must have been speakers of Yiddish, were at least bilingual in German as well. In 1920 their number was 8300 and by 1956 it was still as high as 6700, but by the present day it has declined to just a few dozen individuals (Neumann 2019a, 380-383).

For the purposes of the present study, a survey was made of the sociolinguistic situation of both Swabian (*Schwowisch*) and Standard German (in Swabian *Däitsch*). Information on Swabian was gathered from six people, all of whom were also interviewed for the collection of grammatical data and recorded for language samples. The group consisted of one male and five female participants and represented three age groups with two participants in each group: 18–25, 50-65, and over 65. Only three of the older participants may be characterized as fully 'native' speakers of Swabian, while the others reported that they 'think' in Standard German and then 'translate' their thoughts into Swabian. However, even the younger participants indicated that they have a strong bond with their older relatives, suggesting a

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familial and cultural link in language use and preservation. Obviously, the Swabian speakers, all of whom are characterized by a more or less complete diglossia in Standard German and bilingualism in Romanian, strive to retain a Swabian identity within the more general German-speaking community. Although Swabian lacks a standardized script and the written forms vary, there are occasional publications in it. The local German weekly newspaper (*Banater Zeitung*) contains regularly a small literary section in Swabian.

The position of both German and Swabian in Timișoara is actively promoted by a number of cultural institutions, including the 'German Cultural Centre' (*Deutsches Kulturzentrum Temeswar*), founded and maintained with private support from Germany, and the state-funded 'German Theatre' (*Deutsches Staatstheater Temeswar*), both of which parallel the corresponding institutions of the Hungarian minority. The cultural centre also contains an externally funded unit of sheltered housing for German speakers (*Adam Müller-Guttenbrunn Haus*). In addition, local churches serve as important centres of Swabian culture and social interaction in the Banat Swabian community. Perhaps most importantly, however, the continuity of German, though not necessarily of Swabian, is guaranteed for the moment by the presence of other German-speaking urban minorities elsewhere in Romania, especially in Transylvania (*Siebenbürgen*), where the Transylvanian Saxons in cities like Cluj-Napoca (*Klausenburg*) and Sibiu (*Hermannstadt*) encounter challenges very similar to those of the Swabians of Timișoara. The demographic development in all these cities has been very similar, and for many purposes, including school textbooks (cf. e.g. Baier et al., 2017), German speakers in Romania can be considered as one population with only historically conditioned regional differences.

There is also a German high school (*Nikolaus Lenau-Lyzeum*) in Timișoara, which, in addition to Romanian, offers German as a language of instruction, though most of the c. 1300 students are not ethnic Germans or Swabians. An anonymous questionnaire distributed among high-school-age students at the school was returned by 37 respondents, born between 2004 and 2006, and comprising 20 females, 16 males, and one undisclosed. Of the respondents, 32 were born in Timișoara, three in Germany, and one in the United States. To the question concerning 'mother tongue', 18 respondents reported Romanian, 14 both Romanian and German, and three (born in Germany) German only, while two included also English as a 'mother tongue'. For a clear majority of the respondents, Romanian was the only language used in communication with parents (26), friends (27), and siblings (20). Even so, a similar majority reported that the German language plays an important or very important role (4–5 on a scale of 5) in their lives (26), and that they intend to pass on the language to their children (28). Although many of the respondents have partial Swabian roots, only two reported active knowledge and frequent use of Swabian. A follow-up interview of six students, three females and three males, confirmed that the school is the only environment where German is used more than other languages, while Romanian is the default language in all other contexts, including the home.

SERBIAN

The Serbian language and its Slavic ancestral forms have been present in the Banat region since early mediaeval times, though the modern Serbian population in the region is mainly the consequence of migrations following the Ottoman invasion of Serbia (1459) and the subsequent wars (Aleksov, 2010; Adam & Maran, 2019). In recent years, the number of ethnic Serbs in Romania, like that of other ethnic minorities, has been declining, being today c. 12,000 (2021), down from c. 18,000 a decade earlier (2011). In the city of Timișoara, the

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numbers show a similar decline from c. 4800 (2011) to the current 2800 (2021), which comprises c. 1.1% of the total urban population. However, from a broader perspective the absolute number of Serbs in Timișoara has been more stable, varying in the period 1880–1930 between c. 2200 and 2700 and reaching only a temporary maximum of c. 7700 in 1992. Although the relative proportion of Serbs has constantly declined, Serbs are still today a somewhat larger minority in the city than Germans and Swabians.

Like Hungarian and German, Serbian in Timișoara is supported by a local infrastructure which comprises a cultural centre under the name 'Union of Serbs in Romania' (*Савез Срба у Румунији*) and a bilingual Serbian secondary school named after Dositej Obradović (*Гимназија Доситеј Обрадовић*), as well as the Serbian Orthodox Christian community with an historical cathedral (*Српска православна саборна црква*) in the city centre. The cultural centre promotes also literary activities and publishes the weekly journal 'Our language' (*Наша реч*) with a diversified cultural, historical, and religious content. However, unlike Hungarian and German, which enjoy various kinds of institutional support from the Hungarian and German states, Serbian has no similar support from Serbia, a circumstance that poses a challenge to the preservation and promotion of the language in Romania. Interestingly, there is no official preference for the use of either the Cyrillic or Latin script for Serbian in Romania. However, in the publications and teaching materials used in the local educational and cultural institutions the consistent use of Cyrillic is observed.

To assess the current status of the Serbian language, a questionnaire was distributed in the form of an online survey to high-school-level students at the Serbian secondary school, as well as to a selection of students at the West University of Timișoara (*Universitatea de Vest din Timişoara*). A total of 45 respondents returned the questionnaire, of whom 36 were from the school and nine from the university, comprising 24 females, 16 males, as well as five undisclosed. A follow-up interview was conducted with 13 respondents, eight from the school and five from the university. The average respondent age was 16 years. The majority of the respondents were born in Romania (80%), but a rather substantial percentage was born in Serbia (20%). The findings reveal an exclusively positive attitude towards speaking and learning Serbian, as expressed by 87% of the participants, suggesting a strong cultural attachment and linguistic pride. Not surprisingly, however, high levels of bi- and multilingualism were evident, in that only 49% of the respondents reported only Serbian as their 'mother tongue', including some without native-like skills, while 30% reported both Serbian and Romanian. A somewhat paradoxical trend emerges, with 60% stating that their proficiency in Romanian surpasses that in Serbian.

Although it is obvious that Romanian inevitably dominates the daily life of all Serbian speakers in Timișoara, the Serbian secondary school, located in premises separate from the Romanian classes, provides an environment where Serbian can be used as the default language. A significant majority, comprising 71% of the respondents reported that they incorporate Serbian in their daily life, and 64% reported using it also beyond the school environment. As 'only' 87% reported using Romanian every day, there seems to exist a small minority of 13% who use Serbian more exclusively. A compelling 80% emphasized the importance of speaking Serbian as a vital component of their identity, highlighting the enduring significance of linguistic ties in shaping their sense of self, while 60% mentioned the ability to speak Serbian as the most important manifestation of their identity. 44% of the respondents mentioned that they are maintaining their knowledge of Serbian because of their wish to preserve the language for future generations and to emphasize their identity. 20% also expressed concerns regarding the potential loss of the

language in the region if they do not use it in their daily lives.

Personal interviews with the representatives of the Union of Serbs in Romania revealed a number of more complex issues and ideas. It turns out that it is not only the lack of financial support from Serbia for enterprises like programs of student exchange and language immersion that makes the sustainability of the language an issue worth of special attention, but it is also the challenge of finding ways to meet the specific requirements of young people. Based on the answers to the questionnaires, only three students out of the 45 respondents see any potential economic benefits from knowing the Serbian language. This situation could change if the opportunities to study in Serbia were promoted accordingly. For the local continuity of Serbian it would be important to emphasize the relevance of the language in the context of Timișoara. A concerning trend emerges as 51% of the respondents expressed an intention to leave the country in the future, many to Serbia, but also elsewhere. Efforts to address these issues and to promote the local retention of the language would be crucial for the sustainability of Serbian ethnicity and culture in Timișoara.

SLOVAK

Slovaks in the Banat region differ from other minorities in that they have never constituted a substantial segment of the urban population of Timișoara. Although there are ethnic Slovak individuals in the city, their number has always been smaller than that of the other minorities, varying during the past century between 288 (1900) and 675 (1992), being more recently down to 385 (2011). There is, however, a more important Slovak community in Nădlac (from Hungarian *Nagylak*), a rural town located at the northern margin of the Banat region, some 60 km northwest of Timișoara and 44 km west of Arad. The Slovaks here number c. 2900 individuals (2021), forming c. 44% of the local population of c. 6700, which makes them the second-largest ethnic group in the town after Romanians. Other groups present in Nădlac include Roma (c. 5%) and Hungarians (c. 2%).

The Nădlac Slovaks descend from settlers who started arriving from the nearby Békéscsaba (Slovak *Békešská Čába*) county of Hungary in the early 19th century (Štefanko, 2006). The demographic transition in Nădlac underscores a complex interplay of historical circumstances. Prior to the arrival of Slovaks, Nădlac was inhabited by Romanians and, notably, Serbs, who historically guarded the Hungarian border. With the waning significance of their role following the end of Ottoman raids, coupled with increased state obligations, many Serbs opted to relocate, thereby creating a vacancy for new settlers. This demographic shift precipitated the influx of Slovak families, commencing with agricultural activities in the autumn of 1802 and culminating in the founding of a permanent settlement in the spring of 1803, an historical event commemorated in the Nădlac Evangelical Church through a pictorial rendition of the Slovak arrival. Another cluster of Slovak settlers had been formed a few decades earlier somewhat further to the north in the mountains of Munții Plopiș (*Rumunské Rudohorie*) in the region of Oradea (*Veľký Varadín*, Hungarian *Nagyvárad*), straddling the administrative boundaries of Bihor and Sălaj counties (Šusteková, 2007). The total population of Slovaks in Romania is today 10,232 individuals (2021).

The Slovak community in Nădlac has an educational and religious infrastructure, comprising both a Catholic and a Lutheran Evangelical church, a lyceum named after the writer Jozef Gregor Tajovský (*Teoretické Lýceum Jozefa Gregora Tajovského*), as well as several smaller primary educational institutions. Slovaks, despite ranking ninth in terms of population size among the ethnic minorities of Romania, have the third-largest representation of children in schools

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with minority language instruction (Daniel, 2009). For the purposes of the present study, an anonymous questionnaire was distributed to high-school-level students at the Jozef Gregor Tajovský Lyceum. Answers were received from 26 respondents, comprising 16 females and 10 males with an average age of 18 years. All respondents were born in either Nădlac or Arad, and all had at least one parent born in Nădlac. In a self-assessment of language skills, most respondents reported full fluency of Slovak at the CEFR levels C2 (10) or C1 (8), while the rest were divided between the levels B2 and B1. To the question concerning 'mother tongue', 10 respondents indicated Slovak, one Romanian, and the rest both Slovak and Romanian. In the last group 10 said that they 'liked' speaking Romanian more.

A gradual transition from Slovak to Slovak-Romanian bilingualism is observed in personal relationships. The language used with grandparents is in a majority of cases reported to be only Slovak (14 out of 26), while in communication with parents almost all (24) mentioned both Slovak and Romanian. With siblings and friends, also, most respondents reported speaking both languages, though a relatively large group (8) said that they speak only Slovak with their siblings against a smaller group (4) who speak only Romanian. Even so, most respondents viewed the Slovak language as an important part of their identity, although they also recognized the dominance of Romanian in the broader society. A large majority (18) of the respondents considered it important to pass on the Slovak language, culture, and identity to their children in the future, with only two respondents not planning to pass on the language. As methods of transmission, they mentioned systematic oral communication, books, games, and various community activities. By passing on the language they wish to make their children multilingual, so that they would be able to communicate also with the older generations in their family who speak only Slovak.

Overall, the findings of the survey suggest that the Slovak community in Nădlac is facing a complex linguistic and cultural landscape. While there is a strong sense of identity and a desire to maintain Slovak, the community's future will depend on its ability to adapt and thrive in a diverse and changing environment. The preservation of Slovak in Nădlac is dependent on the continued efforts of individuals, families, and community organizations in a situation where the language use and identity of the younger generation will likely be influenced by the increasing dominance of Romanian in the region. Support for language education programs, cultural events, and media initiatives could potentially foster a stronger sense of Slovak identity and language vitality among the younger generation. In this context, it is interesting to note that the engagement of the respondents with Slovakia and Slovak media turned out to be relatively limited. Only a small minority (3 out of 26) expressed any interest in what is happening in Slovak politics and society. This suggests that the cultural identity of the Nădlac Slovaks is primarily rooted in their local community and family traditions. At the same time, it is alarming that a majority of the respondents (15) would like to live in another country in the future.

COMPARATIVE OBSERVATIONS

The above summaries of the current state of the Hungarian, German, Serbian, and Slovak minorities of Timișoara and adjacent parts of the Banat region are largely based on the answers received to questions concerning the self-reported linguistic behaviour and identity of young individuals, typically of upper high-school-age. This is the age group that will be responsible for the transmission and survival of their respective languages in the region. The question concerning 'identity' in a context which includes both 'nationality' (often defined by citizenship) and 'ethnicity', as well as 'mother tongue' (often

defined in terms of heritage language), is notoriously complex (Byrd, 2009). In spite of their historical and demographic differences, the four minorities examined here share similar challenges, many of which are connected with the fact that they today live in an environment heavily dominated by the Romanian state language (cf. e.g. Boia, 2016). This is evident in, for instance, the graphic and acoustic landscape of Timișoara, where the minority languages are seen and heard only within the restricted spaces reserved for them in schools, churches, and other cultural institutions. The situation is slightly different for Slovaks in the smaller urban environment of Nădlac, where the local minority is large enough to allow it to make a more noticeable contribution to the visual and auditory environment in public spaces.

All four minorities speak languages functioning as official state languages in nearby countries outside of Romania. For this reason, they can benefit from the linguistic infrastructure, including various kinds of educational and media output, produced in their linguistic 'homelands'. In general, apart from the occasional lexical and grammatical interference of Romanian, the varieties spoken in the Banat region differ little from the corresponding standard languages, meaning that the languages themselves are not 'endangered'. An exception is Swabian, which is idiosyncratic enough to form a separate entity that, as such, cannot be served by the German literary standard. The collecting of language samples and narratives from the last speakers of Banat Swabian has been an important task until recently (Lönnqvist, 2023), but today such work is no longer possible, because the remaining Swabian speakers have gone over to using the standard language, which is also the only variety taught at the German school in Timișoara. As far as the commitment of the linguistic 'homelands' to their crossborder minorities in Romania is concerned, it is clearly strongest in the cases of Hungary and Germany and weakest in the case of Serbia. Hungary and Germany are also the countries which since the 1990s have attracted and absorbed massive waves of 'repatriates', a development that has reduced these minorities in Romania to a tiny fraction of their former size.

The biggest changes that have taken place in the recent past concern the generational shift of patterns of individual bilingualism. The principal kind of urban bilingualism in the past used to be Hungarian and German, and this is still the case for many middle-aged minority representatives in Timișoara. However, with the exodus of the majority of ethnic Hungarians and Germans from the region, the remaining speakers of Hungarian and German are no longer interacting with each other on the community level, and only one case of Hungarian-German bilingualism was observed among the young individuals surveyed and interviewed for the present study. Although German still retains a certain prestige status as the most 'international' language of the region (cf. Laihonen, 2009), as is also suggested by the fact that many of the students enrolled in the German school are not ethnic Germans or Swabians, the local number of German speakers is too small to have an impact on the other minorities, all of which are more focused on the survival of their own ethnic languages. Also, as an apparent consequence of the increasing number of mixed marriages with Romanian speakers, 33% of young Hungarian speakers (38 of 114) and 38% of young German speakers (14 out of 37) in Timișoara reported having 'mother-tongue-level' bilingualism in Romanian. A similar picture is shown by the Serbian speakers, among whom 30% (14 out of 45) reported being fully bilingual in Romanian. It goes without saying that 'bilingualism' is always a relative concept, but it is obvious that what the respondents mean is a full functional competence in both the ethnic heritage minority language and the dominant state language.

What is also being lost is the old tradition of widespread urban multilingualism, in which the

'smaller' minorities of Timișoara, in particular, Jews, but also Serbs and Slovaks, as well as, earlier, even Romanians, used to be at least trilingual in both Hungarian and German, the two dominant languages that enjoyed the strongest presence in the traditional linguistic environment and graphic landscape. With the rising role of Romanian, the typical pattern for many middle-aged minority individuals is today a more or less full trilingualism in Hungarian, German, and Romanian, while ethnic Romanians are no longer fluent in any of the minority languages. Acquired multilingualism is, however, still supported by the Romanian school system, which allows several foreign languages, including Latin, French, and Spanish, but also German and English, to be studied in the context of the school programme. Although this does not necessarily guarantee full fluency, it is obvious that students graduating from the minority schools are better equipped for a multilingual adulthood than those graduating from monolingual Romanian majority schools.

All the four minorities examined here share a generally very positive attitude towards their ethnic and heritage languages. In spite of their almost full bilingualism in Romanian, a large majority of all minority individuals regard their specific minority language as their most important identity factor, which they also wish to pass on to the next generation. Most of them, with the exception of the Serbian speakers, also consider their language skills to be a potential source of economic benefits in the future. This does not necessarily imply that they would wish to emigrate to their linguistic 'homelands'. Although emigration plans are still common among the young Serbian and Slovak speakers, the remaining Hungarians, in particular, who are the largest extant minority group, see the Banat region as their true 'homeland', and even if they have connections with Hungary, most of them plan a future in Timișoara and Romania. From this point of view, it is not surprising that they express a widespread lack of interest in what happens in Hungary in the political and cultural spheres. This suggests that they regard their ethnic and linguistic identity as a regional feature, which they combine with a social and political identity as citizens of Romania.

DIVERSITY THEN AND NOW

Much of the research done on urban multilingualism, multiculturalism, and interculturalism has been focussed on very large urban complexes under keywords such as 'global city' (Sassen, 2005), 'superdiversity' (Duarte & Gogolin, 2013; Mar-Molinero, 2020), 'metroethnicity' (Maher, 2005), or 'metrolingualism' (Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015). In the European context the focus of research has also been on large cities, often national capitals, which typically contain a large number of recently introduced immigrant minorities (cf. e.g. Extra & Yağmur, 2011; King & Carson, 2016). In many such metropolitan hubs linguistic diversity is a relatively new phenomenon, or, at least, it has experienced a rapid expansion caused by recent transnational migration. Against this background, Timișoara offers a different picture: it is a medium-sized regional centre with only small or medium-sized minorities (cf. Boix-Fuster, 2015), and its original diversity has been undergoing a decline, rather than expansion. In a larger framework, the case of Timișoara is, of course, not unique, for a similar development of declining diversity can be observed in many other cities in various parts of eastern, southern, and northern Europe.

Historically, the urban multilingualism of Timișoara seems to have reached its 'golden age' in the decades immediately preceding World War I. Like other empires of the *Belle Époque*, Austria-Hungary was an internally highly diversified multiethnic and multilingual construction (Prokopovych, Bethke & Scheer, 2019). Timișoara, like other urban centres of the Hungarian part of the empire, was an inherently

multilingual city (cf. Varga, 2014), though in terms of absolute size it was, of course, much smaller than today. The population was, however, rapidly growing, rising from 38,702 in 1880 to 86,850 in 1920, when it already comprised all the ethnic and linguistic groups, the remnants of which, at least, are still today present in the city: Germans, Hungarians, Romanians, Jews, Serbs, and Slovaks (here listed in order of descending population size as of 1920), as well as small communities of Bulgarians, Ukrainians, and Roma. It is not without cause that the Austro-Hungarian system of ethnic and linguistic administration, despite its ultimate failure in the Balkans, has been mentioned as a possible model for managing regional diversity in today's formally united Europe (Schjerve-Rindler & Vetter, 2007).

A serious challenge to the old imperial system of ethnic administration in Europe was posed by the new nation states that emerged from the former empires after World War I. The changes in many border regions were, however, slow. In the interwar years, when the Banat region was already divided by international borders, but with most of it belonging to the Kingdom of Romania, the multilingual tradition continued without substantial changes. In 1930, when the German and Hungarian communities in Timișoara were of an approximately equal size (32,000–33,000), ethnic Romanians were still in a minority in the city (c. 25,000). The nation-state ideology grew, however, stronger, continuing also after the Communist takeover (1947). To promote the position of ethnic Romanians in minority-dominated border regions, as well as to counteract the effects of 'Magyarization', the government applied an active assimilative policy known as 'Romanianization' (Burcea, 2009), which ultimately was one of the factors causing the mass emigration of minorities in the 1990s. Even so, the language policies of post-Communist Romania (Constantin, 2004; Dragoman, 2018) have been developing in a basically minority-friendly direction, as is also evident from the fact that schools are permitted to operate with Hungarian, German, Serbian, and Slovak as languages of instruction at all levels. All these languages, together with several others, are officially recognized as 'minority languages' in Romania.

The dominant position of Romanian in today's Timișoara means that the traditional type of multilingualism in public spaces has been lost. With the former minorities substantially reduced, the urban population is for both practical and economic reasons served by the dominant Romanian state language, which is the default language in all administrative, social, and commercial functions. As a result, the minorities have become compartmentalized in their own niches, which apart from the immediate family circle includes their ethnospecific schools, churches, theatres, and other institutions. Since the minorities are no longer fluent in each other's languages, Romanian has become their mutual *lingua franca.* Combined with the factor of mixed marriages of the parental generation, many young minority individuals consider Romanian as an additional 'mother tongue', although they typically declare that they still remain emotionally committed to their inherited ethnic language – even in cases when they know it less well than Romanian. Obviously, they identify themselves both with the minority and the majority depending on the social context. Such ambivalent identities could possibly be viewed as examples of 'ethnicity as fluid' (Howard, 2000: 375), but, at the same time, they suggest that ethnicity, at least in the European context, often has an emotional core that relates to the individual's heritage language.

It is, however, also possible to view the city as a whole as 'fluid' (Leadbetter, 2022), in which the present represents only an ephemeral moment in an endless chain of transformations. This is very much true of Timișoara, especially when we consider its origins and early history, but also its present-day profile. The latest stage in this process

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is the current trend of globalization, which is finally bringing an incipient 'superdiversity' also to Timișoara. The linguistic effects of globalization are well known from other parts of the world (cf. e.g. Mac Giolla Chríost, 2007), but Timișoara is still in the emerging periphery of this development. Even so, there is already a growing number of recent immigrants from countries such as Turkey, Nepal, Pakistan, and others, working in various fields in the city. However, unlike the old minorities, these groups are not yet fully integrated into their new environment, and they tend to lack an internal coherence, which is why they do not form clearcut ethnic or linguistic communities. The same is true of the international students who come to obtain an academic degree in Timișoara. The local medical university (*Universitatea de Medicină și Farmacie 'Victor Babeș' din Timișoara*) offers instruction in English and French. All of this has rapidly increased the role of, in particular, English as a language of intercultural communication in the city.

CONCLUSIONS

All circumstances considered, Timișoara is relatively well placed to maintain and develop further its multiethnic and multilingual heritage. Although the former diversity has been substantially reduced because of emigration and assimilation, qualitatively speaking all the former ethnic and linguistic groups are nevertheless still present, and each of them is supported by an ethnospecific infrastructure comprising schools, churches, cultural centres, theatres, and other institutions. It is true that the former everyday multilingualism on the street, including the multilingual graphic landscape, has been lost, and the minorities have become compartmentalized in separate niches. At the same time, the earlier patterns of bi- and multilingualism have been replaced by widespread bilingualism in Romanian. Even so, the minority languages survive at the community level in families and institutions, and even young representatives of the minorities are committed to retain their ethnic and linguistic identity and to pass on their languages to the next generation. At the emotional level the minority languages are more highly valued than the uniform state language.

Many of the activities promoting the survival of the minority languages are financed by the speaker communities themselves on a voluntary basis, sometimes with the help of crowd funding projects, but the municipal administration has also been keen to support the multilingual image of Timișoara, which it sees as a potential asset for marketing the city and attracting fresh external resources. Important contributions have been made by the Hungarian and German states in support of the continuity of Hungarian and German as living urban languages in Timișoara, while similar support for Serbian and Slovak is still to come. However, irrespective of the challenges, the information from self-reporting, as summarized in the present paper, suggests that the future of the minority languages in the city may be considered as secured for at least one generation to come.

It remains to be seen what the impact of the newest waves of transnational immigration, most of which come from outside of Europe, will be. There is a danger that this will result in an increased use of English as the default language of urban communication, a development that would mean an impoverishment, rather than an enrichment, of the linguistic environment. It is also possible that the new immigrants, because of their inherent heterogeneity, will quickly be assimilated to the local linguistic majority. Successfully coping with the task of handling both old and new linguistic diversity will certainly require creative solutions of the current and future decision makers in Timișoara.

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A NOTE ON THE STATISTICAL SOURCES

The historical population figures quoted in this paper are based, apart from the sources listed above, on the detailed summary in *Temes megye településeinek etnikai* (*anyanyelvi / nemzetiségi*) *adatai 1880–1992* [Ethnic data on the settlements of Temes County, 1880–1992] by E. Árpád Varga, available at: https://www.kia.hu/kiakonyvtar/konyvtar/erdely/erdstat/tmetn.pdf (Kulturális Innovációs Alapítvány Könyvtára). Recent census data are based on the publications of the Romanian National Institute of Statistics (*Institutul Național de Statistică*) in *Recensământul Populației și Locuințelor: Populația rezidentă după etnie* (2011: https://www.recensamantromania.ro/rpl-2011/rezultate-2011/ and 2021: https://www.recensamantromania.ro/). See also the Romanian, Hungarian, German, Serbian, and English versions of the Wikipedia entry on Timișoara.

ACCESS TO SAMPLE QUESTIONNAIRES

The following links allow access to the questionnaires used for collecting data from the speakers of Hungarian, Serbian, Slovak, and German (in Romanian).

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfmDRHLABRz0HCSUqntJv-hxDPztguzBue5xINYqwwP0lBTMA/formResponse

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSd0dI1vsbOduj-qq0BpVaD9DnF8lwi1ANLfS5A0j0LWFX9-bA/formResponse

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfmDwlkpTWwkAyf7QgUvR3Y8HVXpnEOPI3ktpdSNZgsRCphDQ/formResponse

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScFRa6o-WiNrev__9wznaCNv_0Xwsj-8TmoBnd5UKqKCrHhhQ/formResponse

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