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Article

Knowledge and Power. Schools and Cultural Missions for the Promotion of the Italian Language in Romania

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Abstract: The spread of the Italian language in Romania has historical roots in medieval times and is part of long-standing cultural, political, and economic exchanges between the two nations. Italian played a role in shaping Romania's cultural identity, beginning with Italian humanists who noted linguistic ties between Latin and Romanian. This connection strengthened over the centuries through diplomatic and cultural ties, including the Transylvanian School movement and the promotion of Latin heritage. In the 19th century, Italian became essential in elite Romanian education, and the interwar period saw a rise in Italian cultural institutions. Despite communist restrictions, Italian instruction persisted and gained renewed interest after the regime's fall, reflecting Italy's continued cultural impact and strong economic ties with Romania. Today, Italian language education remains significant for young Romanians, enriching bilateral relations in a connected Europe.

Keywords: Italy; Romania; language; culture; school; Latin; diplomatic relations; foreign policy; cultural influence; communism

Introduction: Latin Echoes in Romanian Culture

The teaching of the Italian language in Romania is embedded within a long-standing historical and cultural context, shaped by a continuous exchange of influences between the two countries. From the presence of Italian communities in past centuries to contemporary academic and professional interest, Italian has maintained a significant role both in the educational sphere and within Romanian society.

Since the Middle Ages, Italian culture has profoundly influenced Romania through numerous Italian authors — humanists, diplomats, historians, travelers, soldiers, and missionaries — who contributed to strengthening the bond between the two regions¹. Between the 14th and 17th centuries, these scholars observed with fascination the linguistic similarities among Italian, Latin, and Romanian, identifying a common root in Roman heritage. The remarkable resemblance between Romanian and other Romance languages was particularly interpreted as evidence of cultural and linguistic continuity, supported by a historical awareness among the Carpathian-Danubian populations regarding their Roman origins.

Politically and diplomatically, the ties between Italy and Romania found fertile ground, fostering enduring connections. Among significant historical episodes, scholars highlight the diplomatic relations maintained by Stephen the Great, Prince of Moldavia (1457–1504), with the Republic of Venice and Pope Sixtus IV (1414–1484). Following Stephen's notable victory over the Turks at Vaslui in 1475, the pope honored him with the title of "Athleta Christi" for his contribution to the defense of Christianity — an esteemed recognition that exemplifies the cultural respect and

¹ Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru,

alliance between Italy and Moldavia. Stephen the Great even corresponded directly with the Pontiff, further illustrating the depth of these bonds.

The insight into the affinity between Romanian and Italian, however, extended beyond political and religious spheres. Thanks to Italian humanists, Western Europe first formally recognized the linguistic connections between Romanian and Latin. Awareness of a cultural kinship between the two languages began to emerge as early as the 15th century, during a time when the Catholic Church was attempting to counter Ottoman expansion into Eastern Europe². Simultaneously, Italy sought to build a bridge to Eastern Christianity, reinforcing a network of solidarity and cultural exchange that facilitated dialogue with the Romanian principalities. This relationship helped sustain Romanian awareness of their Latin roots and fostered a mutual admiration that would nurture cultural ties between the two countries in the centuries to follow.

In 1451, in his work *Historia tripartita disceptativa convivalis*³, the humanist Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459) described the presence of “a colony, said to have been left there by Trajan”, referring to a population that, despite being surrounded by so-called barbarian peoples, retained a vocabulary rich in Latin terms such as “oculum,” “digitum,” “manum,” and “panem.” Bracciolini’s testimony indicated a clear descent of Romanians from Latin colonists, signaling a linguistic and cultural continuity with the ancient Roman Empire.

The historian and humanist Flavio Biondo (1392–1463) appears to have been one of the first intellectuals to recognize and comment on the similarities between Romanian and Italian, attributing this affinity to a shared Latin ancestry. He first mentioned it in 1452 in a letter to King Alfonso of Aragon (1396–1458)⁴, and subsequently in 1453 in a missive to the Doge of Genoa, Pietro di Campo Fregoso (1412–1459)⁵. Both documents were composed within the context of promoting a new crusade against the Turks, who, starting in the 15th century, had extended their rule over the Romanian regions of Wallachia and Moldavia.

Enea Silvio Piccolomini (1405–1464), who would later become Pope Pius II, made a significant contribution to Western awareness of the Romanians’ Latin roots. Piccolomini observed that although evolved, the Romanian language was still recognizable as Latin and was almost comprehensible to an Italian speaker⁶. In his *Cosmographia*⁷ of 1458, he also delved into the mythical legend that the Roman general Flaccus had originated the term “Wallachians,” by which Romanians were known. Though lacking a solid historical basis, this myth held symbolic importance, as it affirmed the idea of a direct descent from Romanity to Romanian identity, confirming to the Western mind the Latinity of this population and strengthening the cultural ties between the two identities.

² Lorenzo Renzi, “Ancora sugli umanisti italiani e la lingua rumena”, in *Romanische Forschungen*, 112, 2000, pp. 1-39.

³ Poggio Bracciolini, *Historia disceptativa tripartita convivalis*, Edizione critica, Florence. Sismel Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2019.

⁴ Flavio Biondo, “Ad Alphonsum Aragonensem serenissimum regem de expeditione in Thurcos Blondus Flavius Forliviensis”, in *Scritti inediti e rari di Flavio Biondo*, Roma, 1927, p. 45.

⁵ Flavio Biondo, “Romano ortos sanguine Vlachos”, in *Ad Petrum de Campo Fregoso illustrem Genuae ducem Blondus Flavius Forliviensis*, in *Scritti inediti e rari di Flavio Biondo*, Roma, 1927, p. 70.

⁶ Enea Silvio Piccolomini, *Aeneae Sylvii Piccolominei postea Pii II Papae. Opera Geographica et Historica*, Helmstadii, 1699, p. 228. Maria Holban, *Calatori straini despre Tarile Romane (volumul 1)*, Bucarest, Editura Stiintifica, 1968, pp. 472, 474.

⁷ Enea Silvio Piccolomini, *Cosmographia Pii Papae in Asiae et Europae eleganti descriptione. Asia historias rerum ubique gestarum cum locorum descriptione complectitur. Europa temporum authoris varias continet historias*, Parigi, Impresa per Henricum Stephanum, 1509, p. 91.

These early testimonies by Italian humanists regarding the Latinity of the Romanian people were not the result of systematic academic studies but rather of personal notes and transmitted narratives, which nonetheless contributed to solidifying the perception of the Romanian people as heirs to a Roman and Latin tradition. Italian scholars reported what they had been told (“according to what is said”) without undertaking thorough historical investigations.⁸ In these descriptions, the Wallachians were identified as a nation of Roman language, descending from both the Dacians and the Romans. This conception was supported by the idea that, scattered across the territories of the former Roman Empire, there were Romance languages that were direct continuations of Latin. This view emphasized the survival of elements of Latin culture and language within the regions of the former Roman Empire, thereby fostering the notion of a cultural and linguistic continuity between the ancient Roman world and the contemporary populations of those territories.

The identification of the Wallachians as a Roman people was therefore based on linguistic and cultural recognition rather than on concrete historical evidence. Although local sources indicate that the Wallachians considered themselves descendants of the Romans and referred to themselves as “rumâni” or “români,” as suggested by local traditions and the accounts of the three prominent humanists mentioned, other sources from the time (Byzantine, Slavic, Magyar) identified them with terms like “Wallachians,” “Vlachs,” “Blachs,” “Volohi,” which signified “Romance-speaking” or “speakers of a Neo-Latin language”⁹. The Italian humanists themselves had no direct contact with the Wallachians, instead learning about them primarily through Hungarian intermediaries. The specific circumstances leading to the adoption of the ethnonym “român” remain poorly documented and continue to be a subject of academic interpretation and debate. This gap raises many questions about the evolution of the Wallachians’ ethnic and linguistic identity and about how they preserved and transformed the Roman legacy over the centuries.

In 1532, Francesco della Valle, a native of Padua and secretary to the Turkish merchant and politician Alvise Gritti, travelled through Transylvania, Moldavia, and Wallachia. Along this journey, he noted with interest that the language spoken by the local population bore surprising similarities to Italian. In an account, curiously written in the vernacular rather than in Latin, della Valle reported that the Romanians referred to themselves as “Romei,” declaring their descent from the ancient inhabitants of Rome. A particularly significant detail emerged when della Valle observed that, when asked who knew how to speak the local language (“Wallachian”), the Romanians would respond, “Sti rominest?” meaning “Do you know Roman?” This response highlighted a direct identification with their Roman roots. To him, therefore, we owe the first unequivocal Western testimony of the ethnonym “Romanian” and the name of the language (“românească”), although official sources continued to use the terms “Wallachia” and “Wallachians.” This testimony represents an important milestone in defining the Romanian identity and in the Western perception of their linguistic culture, indicating a consolidation of local ethnic and linguistic consciousness.

⁸ A volte, i cambiamenti sociali spesso possono essere profondi, quando implicano il partecipare allo sviluppo della vita cittadina, e all’incremento della densità della popolazione. In questo caso, i rapporti sociali si possono estendere dalla comunità di origine, spesso disgregata, a nuove e importanti relazioni di amicizia. (Sometimes, social changes can often be profound, when they involve participating in the development of city life, and increasing population density. In this case, social relations can extend from the often disrupted community of origin to new and important friendship relationships). See: Simion Belea, “Continuità e discontinuità nell’esperienza del migrante”, Buletin Stiintific, seria A, Fascicula Filologie, Vol. 22, No. 1, pp. 253-258 Editura UT Press. 2013.

⁹ Lorenzo Renzi, 2000, *Cit.*, pp. 1-39.

Historical Premise on the Terminology Used

In the following analysis, the terms “Italy” and “Romania” refer to their current territorial configurations, while taking into account the political and territorial transformations that both countries have undergone from the late 19th century to the present. These changes have solidified national unity and fostered a strong sense of identity and pride, further stimulating substantial economic and infrastructural developments.

In 1859, Alexandru Ioan Cuza (1820-1873) unified the principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia, initiating the history of modern Romania. Following Cuza’s deposition in 1866, the throne was offered to Carol of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, who, as Carol I of Romania (1839-1914), strengthened national independence, formally recognized in 1878 after the Russo-Turkish War. In 1918, Romania further expanded its borders by uniting with Transylvania, Bukovina, and Bessarabia in what is known as the Great Union. However, defeat in World War II led to significant territorial losses, including the cession of Bessarabia and part of Bukovina to the Soviet Union. In 1947, Romania itself became a people’s republic under Soviet influence.

The young Kingdom of Italy, meanwhile, entered a phase of territorial expansion, incorporating the so-called “unredeemed lands.” It annexed Veneto and most of Friuli in 1866, Lazio in 1870, and, after World War I, Trentino, Alto Adige, the remaining part of Friuli in 1919, and Eastern Venezia Giulia in 1920. Expansion concluded in 1924 with the integration of Trieste, Istria, Zara, some Dalmatian islands, and part of the Free State of Fiume. After World War II, following the 1946 referendum, Italy transitioned from a monarchy to a republic. The Paris Peace Treaty of 1947 led to a reconfiguration of Italy’s borders, with Istria, Dalmatia, and some Adriatic islands ceded to Yugoslavia. The Julian area’s Zones A and B remained under international and Yugoslav administration, respectively, until the 1975 Treaty of Osimo, which secured Italy’s control of Trieste, while Zone B was officially ceded to Yugoslavia.

These changes, marked by the end of global conflicts, reinforced national identities and the institutions of each state. Today, Romania and Italy are democratic countries and members of international organizations such as NATO and the European Union. Although the two countries have followed different historical and territorial paths, their present institutions are the result of a long process of consolidation, encompassing the postwar period. In this context, the historical, cultural, and linguistic ties between Italy and Romania remain pivotal in bilateral relations, shaping the perception and diffusion of Italian language and culture in Romania, and viceversa.

The Rediscovery of Latin Roots and the Bond Between Romania and Italy in the 19th Century

In the 19th century, the Transylvanian School (Școala Ardeleană), an influential Romanian cultural and intellectual movement, spurred a passionate rediscovery of the Latin roots of the Romanian language, initiating a process of philological research that would revolutionize Romania’s linguistic identity. One of the most significant contributions of this movement was the introduction of the Latin alphabet, which replaced the Cyrillic script, symbolically aligning the Romanian language more closely with the Latin world and Italy. This period of cultural revival coincided with intensified contacts and connections between Italy and Romania, strengthening the recognition of linguistic similarities between Italian and Romanian, both Latin heirs. Many Romanian intellectuals of the time developed a profound admiration for Italy, seen as the symbol and homeland of the ancient Romans, whose army under Trajan had brought language and culture to the province of Dacia. This ideal meshed with the 19th-century historical context—a period marked by intense struggles for independence and national unity across Europe. In particular, the Italian “Risorgimento” served as a model and inspiration for many Romanians, reinforcing the idea of a shared cultural and linguistic heritage.

This era of cultural and political fervor also promoted the spread of Italian language and culture in Romanian educational institutions, with enthusiastic acceptance by the Romanian intellectual

class, which saw Italy as a symbol of their Latin identity. Through the promotion of classical studies and the appreciation of Roman origins, the Transylvanian School significantly contributed to constructing a Romanian national consciousness tied to Latinity and cultural renewal, laying the foundation for a lasting connection between the two nations.

Following the establishment of the Greek-Catholic Church in Romania and the official recognition of the Pope's leadership around 1700, the enthusiasm for Latin origins, which had initially characterized the cultural and political elites, gradually expanded to the entire population, becoming a central element of Romanian national identity. This movement towards Latin traditions was no longer confined to a small circle of intellectuals and aristocrats but evolved into a shared phenomenon, transcending social classes within the broader process of modernization the country was undergoing. In this context, Latin language, culture, and religion were perceived as distinctive elements that connected Romania to the Christian West and the historical legacy of the ancient Roman Empire. The spread of this cultural vision within Romanian society played a crucial role in the formation of a national consciousness, fostering a strong sense of belonging and pride, and promoting the development of a collective identity that defined itself in opposition to Ottoman, Slavic, and Byzantine influences.

A particularly symbolic episode of this connection with Roman heritage is the legendary journey of the shepherd Badea Cârțan. In 1896, he set out on foot from Transylvania to reach Rome and pay homage to Trajan's Column, regarded by Romanians as a symbol of their Latin origins and a kind of "birth certificate of the Romanian people". Arriving in Rome, carrying a handful of soil and some wheat grains as symbols of his homeland, his presence astonished the Romans and inspired various popular legends. It is said that upon seeing him in traditional dress, a bystander exclaimed in surprise, "A Dacian has come down from the Column!" to which Cârțan replied, "I brother, you Rome, I România, shepherd român." This exchange, which became famous, reinforced the idea of a historical continuity between ancient Rome and the Romanian people, giving rise to a symbolism that endures to this day. Cârțan's story soon became well known, even leading to his reception in the Vatican, where he is said to have answered in Latin to Cardinal Mariano Rampolla, declaring: "Cives romanus sum"¹⁰. Beyond the anecdotal aspect, this episode embodies the deep bond that Romanians feel toward their Latin roots and reflects the symbolic significance of Rome's culture and history in shaping Romanian national identity. Cârțan's journey highlights how Roman heritage, through evocative stories and gestures, intertwines with national pride, consolidating a cultural identity rooted in ancient history and still resonant in modern times.

Within this historical backdrop, in 1848, the Transylvanian poet Andrei Mureșanu (1816–1863) composed *Deșteaptă-te, române* (Awaken, Romanian), an anthem that would become a powerful symbol of unity and resistance, officially adopted until 1918 and later reestablished as the national anthem in 1990. The text contains particularly meaningful references to the Romanians' Latinity and Roman heritage, emphasizing an awareness of ancient ancestry and a shared culture. In the anthem, Mureșanu exhorts Romanians to awaken from the "sleep of death" and rediscover the strength rooted in their origins, proclaiming that "Roman blood" still flows in their veins. The figure of Trajan, conqueror of Dacia and symbol of Roman origins, is invoked as a source of pride and strength. With this reference to Trajan, celebrated for his victories, Mureșanu underscores the importance of Latinity as the foundation of Romanian identity and the continuity of culture with ancient Rome.

At the beginning of the 19th century, Italian was commonly taught in Romanian schools. However, it was likely Luigi Gianelloni or Ludovic Geanelloni (?-1856) who, in 1835, established the first Italian school in Bucharest, known as "academie de băieți". This institution remained open for several decades, becoming a crucial center for the promotion of Italian language and culture in Romania. Gianelloni's academy not only provided high-quality education but also served as a cultural meeting point between Italy and Romania. The teaching extended beyond language to

¹⁰ Ionel Cionchin, "Badea Cârțan, țăranul autodidact ajuns per pedes la Roma", in *Orizzonti Culturali Italo-Romeni/Orizonturi culturale italo-române*, no. 10, an III, 2013.

include Italian literature, history, and culture, shaping a new generation of Romanian intellectuals and professionals with a strong affinity for Italian culture. The academy quickly became a respected institution, attracting students not only from the local elite but also from other regions of Romania. The academy's success is evidenced by its longevity, as it continued operating for several decades, adapting to the social and political changes of the time.

Gianelloni was also an innovator in teaching, introducing modern methods that were ahead of his time. His school was among the first to use contemporary Italian educational materials and to promote active, participatory learning, making education more engaging for students. Besides his role as an educator, Gianelloni maintained close ties with Italian intellectuals and politicians, fostering an ongoing dialogue between the two nations. This cultural exchange enriched the academy's curriculum and helped strengthen the bond between Italy and Romania.

Following this, other schools were established, including in agricultural colonies where the Italian state and Catholic Church collaborated to educate Italian children. Among the most prominent figures in promoting Italian language and culture were Gerolamo Abbeatici, Orazio Spinazzola, Gian Luigi Frolo, and Ramiro Ortiz.

Gerolamo, or Ieronim Abbeatici, a renowned Italian teacher active in Galați and Bucharest in the 19th century, is remembered for his contributions to language education. His work emerged in a time of fervent interest in learning European languages in Romania. In the 19th century, Romania was experiencing a cultural and political awakening, with a desire to align with major European nations. Foreign languages, particularly Italian and French, were seen as a way to modernize and connect with Western Europe. Abbeatici, with his deep linguistic knowledge and passion for teaching, played a significant role in language education in Romania. His writings not only facilitated learning Italian but also fostered greater understanding and mutual respect between Italians and Romanians. His textbooks were widely used in schools, appreciated for their clarity and practicality, and demonstrated his pedagogical effectiveness. His notable works include:

- *Gramatica Italiano-Romanu, intitulată Instructorul Italian* (1848), published in Galați and Bucharest, one of the first attempts to create a linguistic bridge between Italian and Romanian, aimed at Romanian students eager to learn Italian by providing practical and theoretical tools;
- *Dialogu Italiano-Romanu, cu începuturi de Gramatica, în Lecțiuni*, dedicated to the "noble Romanian nation" (1860-1862). This bilingual Italian-Romanian dialogue, with grammar elements presented in lessons, reflects Abbeatici's respect for Romanian culture and his dedication to fostering cultural exchange between Italy and Romania.

Gerolamo Abbeatici remains a significant figure in Romania's linguistic education history. His textbooks are still remembered as pioneering in language instruction and are studied as examples of pedagogical excellence. His work has left a lasting mark, highlighting the importance of multilingualism and cultural dialogue. Through his works, Abbeatici contributed not only to education but also to strengthening cultural ties between Italy and Romania, making him a notable figure in the educational landscape of his time.

Another key figure was Orazio Spinazzola, a revolutionary from Naples who lived in exile in the Danubian Principalities after the 1848 uprisings. Spinazzola authored several Italian-Romanian grammars and dialogue collections, aimed at inspiring interest in Italian literature. His works include *Grammatica romena e dialoghi romeni-italiani* (1863), a text designed to facilitate learning Italian for Romanians and to promote a closer cultural bond between the two peoples. Spinazzola taught at the Saint Sava School in Bucharest between 1850 and 1870 and was one of the proponents of creating a chair of Italian language and literature at the University of Bucharest. He also initiated collaboration between the Italian department at the University of Bucharest and the Romanian department in Turin (1863).

Spinazzola's influence extended beyond teaching; he played a key role in promoting cultural and academic exchanges between Italy and Romania. Through his efforts, a long-lasting cooperation between academic institutions in the two countries was established, fostering mutual understanding

and cultural ties. Spinazzola is remembered not only for his teaching skills but also for his strong commitment to fostering friendship between Italy and Romania.

The Venetian Gian Luigi Frollo (1832-1899) was a teacher at the “King Carol I” High School in Brăila and the “Matei Basarab” High School in Bucharest, significantly contributing to Italian language teaching in Romania. As a linguist, he published numerous works on philology and grammar, as well as dictionaries to facilitate Italian learning, including:

- *Lecțiuni de limba și literatura italiană. Elemente de Gramatică, Lecturi și traducțiuni* (1868), published in Brăila, providing students with a solid grammatical foundation and offering readings and translations to improve linguistic skills;

- *Limba română și dialectele italiene* (1869), exploring connections between Romanian and Italian dialects, highlighting similarities and mutual influences;

- *Vocabolario italiano-romanesco, francese-romanesco e romanesco-italiano-romanesco*, published in 1869 in Pest, with three grammatical treatises and a list of proper names.

Frollo criticized the preference for French in Romanian education, describing it as “Gallomania”, and argued that Italian study was equally important. He proposed that Italian become a mandatory subject, as it already was in some commercial schools and high schools. He also advocated for creating a comparative philology chair for Romance languages and literature at the University of Bucharest’s Faculty of Letters to promote a broader and more inclusive approach to Romance language studies.

Gian Luigi Frollo was an influential figure in Romania’s linguistic education. His works and innovative proposals aimed not only to improve Italian language instruction but also to promote greater cultural and linguistic openness. In the vibrant cultural context of the time, marked by lively philological discussions, Frollo conceived the idea of developing a new orthographic system for the Romanian language, based on phonetics rather than etymology. This proposal was so well-received by his contemporaries that he was invited to teach at the Faculty of Letters at the University of Bucharest in 1878. His legacy continues to be recognized and appreciated for its enduring contribution to the linguistic and cultural education of future generations.

Last but not least, it is fitting to remember the Theatine scholar Ramiro Ortiz (1879–1947), another influential figure in promoting the teaching of the Italian language in Romania, further strengthening the cultural and academic ties between the two countries. In 1909, he was appointed by the Italian Ministry of Education to move to Romania as a lecturer in Italian language and literature. He spent 24 years in this role as a professor at the University of Bucharest. During his tenure, he established the Italian Language and Literature Seminar and served as the editor of the review *Roma* from 1921 to 1933¹¹. Ortiz is well known for producing the first complete Italian translation of the works of Romanian poet Mihai Eminescu and for his exegetical work on the *Divine Comedy*. Among his many contributions, his vibrant history of Italian culture in Romania (*Per la storia della cultura italiana in Rumania*, Sfetea, Bucharest, 1916) and his history of Romanian literature (*Letteratura romena*, Signorelli, Rome, 1941) stand out. In 1933, after spending a quarter of a century

¹¹ In 1933, the review was renamed *Studii Italiene* under the direction of Alexandru Marcu (1894-1955). Marcu, a disciple of Ramiro Ortiz, took its direction during a transitional period for the Italian cultural presence in Romania. Ortiz, a prominent figure in promoting Italian culture abroad, returned to Italy that same year, leaving the chair of Italian Language and Literature at the University of Bucharest vacant. Alexandru Marcu, already deeply involved in Italian academic and cultural activities in Romania, became the new holder of the chair, continuing the work of his mentor. Under Marcu’s leadership, *Studii Italiene* sustained its mission to disseminate Italian culture and literature in Romania, strengthening academic and cultural ties between the two countries. The journal focused on publishing literary, historical, and philological articles, contributing to the formation of a generation of Romanian scholars with a profound understanding of Italian culture. Marcu’s directorship represented continuity in the promotion of Italian studies in Romania, solidifying the review’s role as a reference point for the academic community and readers interested in Italian-Romanian cultural relations.

in Romania, he returned permanently to Italy and assumed the chair of Romance Philology at the University of Padua. During his years in Romania, Ortiz developed a profound knowledge and appreciation for Romanian culture and language, which he brought back with him. In 1937, aiming to promote the study and dissemination of Romanian culture in Italy, he established a Romanian Language and Literature lectureship at the University of Padua.

Cultural Relations Between Italy and Romania in the Early 20th Century: From Diplomacy to Cultural and Ideological Influence

Throughout the 20th century, relations between Italy and Romania intensified significantly, aided by the establishment of key cultural missions that aligned with broader foreign policy objectives. Italy aimed to replace France as the primary influential power in the Danubian-Balkan region, positioning itself as a guarantor of independence for the “young nations” of Eastern and Southeastern Europe¹². This geopolitical ambition translated into a series of initiatives designed to strengthen cultural, economic, and political ties with countries in the area, including Romania. In this context, Italian capitalism proved particularly active, continuing a strategy of economic penetration that had begun before the outbreak of World War I.

Italy's approach focused not only on cultural promotion but also on expanding economic and commercial activities, capitalizing on the opportunities provided by the region's emerging markets. Italy's interest in Romania was especially driven by the country's economic potential, notably in the energy sector. Romania's rich natural resources, such as oil deposits, attracted Italian investors eager to participate in the exploitation of these strategic assets. Italian initiatives in finance and industry were accompanied by a growing cultural presence, aimed at consolidating Italian influence and creating a favorable environment for investments.

Cultural missions, through schools, cultural societies, and language promotion activities, reinforced Italy's image as a reliable partner and a promoter of progress. This multidimensional penetration strategy found fertile ground in Romania, where an interest in Italian ideas and culture aligned with the country's economic and developmental needs. Furthermore, Italy could rely on a longstanding tradition of migration to Romania¹³, which, beginning in the latter half of the 19th century, by the interwar period included at least 60,000 Italian workers, craftsmen, professionals, and investors active in Romania¹⁴.

A significant moment in this process occurred at the beginning of the century, when the Italian community in Bucharest founded a cultural club in 1901 with the aim of promoting the Italian language and culture among the Romanian population. This initiative responded to the growing demand for cultural exchanges and the desire to consolidate ties between the two countries. In 1902, the cultural club convened a general assembly, attended by Romanian personalities sensitive to

¹² Stefano Santoro, “Cultura e propaganda nell'Italia fascista: l'Istituto per l'Europa Orientale”, in *Passato e presente*, XVII, no. 48, 1999, pp. 55-78.

¹³ Le motivazioni soggettive possono essere le più diverse; con l'evoluzione sociale altre si aggiungono a quelle tradizionali, e si legano alle motivazioni oggettive. Le potenziali aspettative possono essere sintetizzate in alcuni valori-obiettivi come ricchezza, status, comfort, stimolo, autonomia, affiliazione. (Subjective motivations can be the most diverse; with social evolution, others are added to the traditional ones, and are linked to objective motivations. Potential expectations can be summarised in certain values-objectives such as wealth, status, comfort, stimulation, autonomy, affiliation) See: Simion Belea, “Motivazioni ed effetti delle migrazioni”, *Buletin Științific, Fascicula Filologie, seria A*, vol. 26, no. 1, pp.217-228, Editura UT Press, 2017.

¹⁴ Antonio Ricci, “Emigranti italiani in Romania: documenti e testimonianze di una comunità dimenticata”, in *Studi Emigrazione*, XLII, no.159, 2005, pp. 661-680.

Italian culture. The goal was to establish a local committee of the “Dante Alighieri” Society, an international organization dedicated to the dissemination of Italian language and culture. Among the promoters of the initiative were prominent figures such as architect Giulio Magni, Professor Benedetto De Luca, who taught Italian language courses at the University of Bucharest, and Luigi Cazzavillan, the influential Italian entrepreneur and publisher¹⁵. The latter dedicated significant personal resources to the creation and development of an Italian school in Bucharest, which he had built in 1901 on the street that now bears his name. The “Regina Margherita” school quickly became a central institution for the Italian community and the diffusion of Italian education and culture in Romania. For almost half a century, until its forced closure in 1948 by the communist authorities, the school represented a pillar of Italian cultural life in Bucharest, offering an educational program that integrated elements of Italian culture and language with the local school context. These cultural initiatives not only strengthened the ties between the Italian and Romanian communities but also contributed to the formation of an environment for intellectual exchange. The promotion of the Italian language and culture among Romanian elites fostered the emergence of a generation of intellectuals and professionals influenced by Italian culture, further consolidating bilateral relations.

After World War I, the position of Italian culture in Romania experienced significant weakening, primarily due to the growing influence of French language and culture, which had already dominated intellectual elites and diplomatic circles for decades. During the 1920s, the diffusion of Italian culture and language in Romania was in a precarious condition, marked by political and economic difficulties, despite the efforts of some Italian professors and intellectuals who worked to keep interest alive.

One of the main promoters of Italian language teaching during this period was the aforementioned Ramiro Ortiz (1879-1947), who worked tirelessly in Bucharest to stimulate interest in Italian language and literature, despite the prevailing dominance of French culture. At the same time, the linguist Gian Domenico Serra (1885-1958), between 1925 and 1939, carried out significant activities in Cluj-Napoca, aiming to promote Italian in a period when Romania was undergoing significant political and social changes.

Between 1938 and 1943, Giuseppe Petronio (1909-2003), a well-known Italianist, became director of the Italian Cultural Institute in Iași, where he continued his efforts to strengthen cultural ties between Italy and Romania, despite the growing political tensions in Europe. Another prominent figure during this period was the philologist Rosa Del Conte (1907-2011), who taught in various cities in Romania, including Bucharest, Câmpulung Muscel, and Cluj-Napoca, between 1942 and 1948. Her academic work and passion for the Italian language helped sustain the teaching of Italian during a turbulent period when international relations and the cultural policies of the communist regime were beginning to be felt.

These “teachers” operated under conditions of extreme economic hardship, without receiving adequate subsidies from Italy or the necessary volumes to enrich the library collections of Italian departments, despite the fact that, in theory, the fascist political project—within the broader scope of a propaganda and cultural influence plan—aimed to promote a positive image of Italy and its cultural

¹⁵ For the important figure of Cazzavillan (1852-1903), considered the founder of modern Romanian press, and his role as a mediator between Italian and Romanian culture, refer to the most up-to-date monograph: Ioan Aurel Pop, Ion Cârja, *Un Italian la București: Luigi Cazzavillan, 1852-1903*, Cluj-Napoca, Academia Română Centrul de studii transilvane – Istituto per le ricerche di storia sociale e religiosa, 2011.; subsequently published also in the Italian edition (Ioan Aurel Pop, Ion Cârja, *Un italiano a Bucarest: Luigi Cazzavillan, 1852-1903*, Roma, Viella, 2012).

values through the dissemination of the Italian language, culture, and books worldwide¹⁶. Although these individual efforts were not sufficient to ensure a strong presence of Italian culture, they represented significant testimonies of personal commitment and passion for spreading Italy's cultural heritage abroad.

The "Dante Alighieri" Society, which had been closed with the onset of World War I, resumed its activities only in 1929. However, in the meantime, on April 7, 1924, the Italian Cultural Institute in Bucharest was founded as a private institution through the initiative of Ramiro Ortiz. Ortiz, a central figure in the promotion of Italian culture in Romania, played a key role in the creation of the Institute, which aimed to spread the Italian language and culture, thereby fostering greater understanding and cooperation between the two countries. The initiative took a significant step forward on April 2, 1933, when the Institute — located in a building on Calea Victoriei, Bucharest's most elegant street — was transformed into a state institution under the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, formalizing its role and consolidating the Italian cultural presence in Bucharest.

This transformation reflected the growing interest of Fascist Italy in strengthening cultural ties and political influence in Romania, in line with the regime's strategy of cultural and diplomatic expansion. As an official state entity, the Institute was able to access greater resources and support to organize cultural, linguistic, and academic activities, thereby consolidating its position as a reference point for both the Italian community and Romanians interested in Italian culture. After Ortiz returned to Italy in 1933, the activities of the Italian Cultural Institute in Bucharest continued under the leadership of Bruno Manzone, a lecturer in Italian language and literature at the University of Bucharest and former deputy secretary general of the Dante Alighieri Society. Manzone led the Institute until 1948, demonstrating considerable skill in combining cultural activities with the propagandistic demands of the Fascist regime's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. By the 1935-1936 academic year, the number of students enrolled in language courses reached a significant 900, in addition to 440 students attending courses in other cities across the Romanian kingdom. These were notable achievements, considering that the period's bilateral diplomatic relations were marked by an overtly anti-Italian sentiment¹⁷, due to Italy's support for Hungarian territorial claims in the revision of the borders set by the Treaty of Trianon on June 4, 1920, which resulted in Hungary losing about two-thirds of its territory and population.

Despite these challenges, Manzone managed to keep the Institute active and influential, strengthening the Italian cultural presence in Romania while also serving as a tool of "soft power" to convey messages favorable to the regime. Cultural activities were skillfully intertwined with events promoting Fascist ideology, attempting to consolidate Italian influence and maintain an active role within the Romanian cultural and political context, even amidst a complex diplomatic climate.

Cultural and Linguistic Renaissance: The Teaching of Italian in Post-Communist Romania

Throughout the 20th century, the teaching of Italian in Romanian schools underwent profound changes, closely tied to the political, social, and ideological shifts that shaped Romania's history. World War II marked a critical turning point, with the fall of fascism signaling the end of Italian aspirations for political and cultural penetration in Romania. Until that moment, Italy had exerted a certain cultural influence in the country, with the spread of the Italian language and the presence of Italian cultural institutions. However, the end of the conflict and the establishment of a new geopolitical order in Europe radically changed this landscape. With Romania's defeat in the Second World War, the country underwent a rapid political transformation, leading it, within a few years, to

¹⁶ Alberto Basciani, "La penetrazione culturale italiana nei Balcani nel periodo interbellico. Il caso dell'Istituto di Cultura di Bucarest", in *Annuario dell'Istituto di Cultura e Ricerca Umanistica Romana di Venezia*, Anno 5, 2003, pp. 474-484 (477).

¹⁷ Alberto Basciani. 2003, *Cit.*, pp. 474-484 (482-483).

fall under the influence of the Soviet Union. The occupation of Romania by the Red Army in 1944 and the introduction of an authoritarian communist regime imposed the centralization of education and a strong ideologization of school curricula. During this period, Russian language and culture became predominant, and the teaching of Russian in schools in the cosmopolitan capital, Bucharest, became mandatory, effectively replacing the Italian and French cultural influences that had characterized the previous years. Promoting the Russian language was part of a broader political strategy aimed at consolidating Soviet control and creating a stronger bond with Moscow, marginalizing other foreign influences. The teaching of Italian, once prominent, was progressively marginalized.

During the communist period, Romania experienced cultural and political isolation that reflected the closure imposed by the regime. The Italian language, which had once been a symbol of culture and international exchange, was relegated to a secondary role and often ignored in school curricula. The centralization of education and the promotion of a dominant Soviet culture severely limited opportunities for learning Italian in Romanian schools. It was only with the fall of the communist regime in 1989 that the situation began to change. The end of Nicolae Ceaușescu's dictatorship and the beginning of the transition to a democratic system allowed for a cultural reopening and a gradual modernization of education. With Romania entering a new geopolitical context and progressively integrating into international organizations like the European Union, the teaching of the Italian language was able to flourish once again. Interest in Italian, which had been suppressed during the communist years, revived thanks to greater cultural freedom and the intensification of exchanges between the two countries. The Italian language, reintroduced in Romanian schools, became a bridge to Western Europe, a symbol of openness and new opportunities, not only in the cultural field but also in the economic and professional spheres.

In 1948, the Italian Cultural Institute in Bucharest was forced to cease its activities by order of the communist authorities, who considered its presence a potential threat to the new regime. The closure of Italian cultural institutions in 1948 marked a forced setback in bilateral relations between Italy and Romania, but the impact of early 20th-century Italian cultural missions continued to leave a lasting mark on relations between the two countries. For nearly two decades, cultural relations between the two countries remained fragmented and circumscribed, reflecting the climate of closure and control imposed by the communist regime. During the years following World War II, Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime imposed strict control over cultural life and foreign relations, creating an isolation that was also reflected in cultural contacts with the rest of the world. Nevertheless, some attempts to maintain cultural communication between the two countries continued, albeit sporadically and often subject to strong political restrictions.

However, the situation began to slowly change from 1964, when Romania officially distanced itself from Soviet influence, breaking its privileged ties with the Soviet Union. This event marked a turning point in Romania's international relations and began a period of "thaw", during which the country sought to open up more to contacts with Western countries. The break with Moscow and Bucharest's growing political autonomy allowed for a gradual relaxation in cultural relations, not only with Italy but also with other European nations. In 1964, the dissolution of the Russian Cultural Institute "Maksim Gorkij" in Bucharest, which had exclusively promoted Russian language and culture, served as a tangible symbol of this change. The end of the exclusive influence of the Russian language and the growing attention to other foreign languages, including Italian, marked a transition towards greater cultural plurality. This new climate favored the gradual opening to Italian culture, which had undergone a period of stagnation under Soviet dominance.

A key moment for the revival of Italian-Romanian cultural relations was the signing of a new Cultural Agreement between Italy and Romania in August 1967. This agreement represented a significant step towards reopening cultural channels between the two countries, allowing Italian culture to regain a stable presence in Romania, albeit cautiously and gradually. The changed political context, with a more autonomous Romania distancing itself from Soviet influence, facilitated this

process, although cultural activities still had to contend with the limitations imposed by the communist regime, which maintained strict control over all areas of public life.

The Italian Cultural Institute in Bucharest, which had been closed during the darkest years of the regime, was slowly able to restart its activities, albeit maintaining a low profile and adapting to the political circumstances. Its reopening marked the beginning of a new phase in cultural relations between Italy and Romania, a phase that, though initially tentative and cautious, laid the foundations for a subsequent resurgence in cultural exchanges. This period of “thaw” paved the way for broader cultural initiatives, which would help strengthen ties between the two countries in the years that followed, even though they remained under the supervision and restrictions of a regime that, despite changing, would never fully loosen its control over education and culture.

The election of Pope John Paul II in 1978 gave a further impetus to the process of “thawing” in cultural and spiritual relations between Italy and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, including Romania, stimulating initiatives for dialogue and mutual understanding, contributing to the overcoming of ideological tensions, and laying the groundwork for future cultural and spiritual integration, which would culminate with the collapse of the communist regime at the end of the 1980s. Karol Wojtyła, of Polish origin, had a profound connection with the countries of the Eastern Bloc, which were living under communist regimes at the time. His direct knowledge of the social and political realities in this region, along with his understanding of the difficulties faced by populations under such regimes, helped foster a new openness and sensitivity towards the culture and traditions of Eastern European peoples. The papacy of John Paul II gave momentum to cultural and religious cooperation with countries like Romania, where, despite the communist influence, deep-rooted Christian traditions existed, along with a strong desire to reconnect with the rest of Europe. His initiatives encouraged the creation of spaces for dialogue and helped partially overcome the barriers imposed by the regime. The figure of the pope, seen as a bridge between East and West, represented a symbol of hope for many Romanian citizens, sparking renewed interest in Italian culture, historically tied to the Catholic Church and Italian educational institutions present in Romania. Thanks to the influence of John Paul II, initiatives for cultural exchange and support for the spread of the Italian language and shared cultural values were strengthened, both at an official level and through informal contacts among intellectuals, academics, and religious leaders. His figure was essential in creating a climate of trust and openness, which, albeit discreetly, favored the strengthening of cultural relations between Italy and Romania.

In the second half of the 1970s, thanks to a relative opening of the communist regime, a group of Italian diplomats initiated a new educational project: the “Aldo Moro” Italian School¹⁸, which provided Italian-language education for early childhood, primary, and lower secondary levels. Initially, the project aimed at meeting the educational needs of the Italian community in Romania. The Italian state provided an annual contribution, which was discontinued in 2006 due to the limited number of enrollments. To prevent the closure of the school, the Italian association “Liberi di Educare” took over its management, but unfortunately, it was unable to maintain a high-quality educational offering. Teaching at the “Aldo Moro” School is conducted in Italian, but since the 1997/98 school year, Romanian language instruction has also been introduced. The latter is also used as a medium of instruction for subjects such as the Romanian language, history, and geography. Additionally, the school offers English language instruction, enriching the linguistic curriculum of its students. The educational programs follow the curricular pathways established by the Italian school system, ensuring an education consistent with Italian educational standards. The teaching staff is composed of both Italian and Romanian teachers, creating a bilingual and multicultural educational environment. The coordination of school activities is entrusted to a director-principal, who oversees the proper functioning of the institution and the harmonious integration of the various educational and linguistic components. This structure allows students to benefit from a comprehensive and diversified education that combines the cultural and linguistic richness of both

¹⁸ <https://scuolaitalianabucarest.com/>.

countries, preparing them to be global citizens with a solid academic foundation and multilingual skills. The integration of the Romanian language into the curriculum reflects the school's commitment to promoting inclusive education that respects local cultural realities, while the teaching of English addresses the growing demand for international education.¹⁹

Additionally, to promote the learning of the Italian language in Romania, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MAECI) sends qualified teachers, provides financial contributions, and makes available textbooks and multimedia teaching materials to the schools most active in teaching Italian.

In the 2017/2018 school year, according to the MAECI²⁰, there were 71 students enrolled at the "Aldo Moro" School in Bucharest, 274 at the "Dante Alighieri" Theoretical High School²¹, 345 at the "Ion Neculce" National College²², and 108 at the "George Barițiu" National College in Cluj-Napoca²³. It is estimated that, together with other bilingual sections within Romanian high schools, there are approximately 1,800 students of Italian in Romania. According to the Memorandum of Understanding between the Italian and Romanian governments on the operation of bilingual sections, all these students have the opportunity to enroll in Italian universities. They can apply to the same courses offered by Romanian universities to which the Romanian diploma grants access, benefiting from specific advantages, such as exemption from the Italian language test. Furthermore, they are treated outside the quota reserved for foreign students, allowing them to compete for admission on equal terms with local students. This approach facilitates the integration of Italian-Romanian students into the educational system, recognizing their cultural and linguistic background and promoting a more inclusive and diverse academic environment.

Outside the capital, unfortunately, educational institutions offering instruction in Italian at the preschool, primary, and secondary levels are scarce, leaving both the historic Italian communities spread across Romania and new Italian immigrants and their children born abroad without support. This represents a significant challenge, especially considering that the 2021 Romanian census officially recorded 5,193 Italian citizens residing in Romania and 4,039 people belonging to the Italian ethnic minority. However, scholars believe that the actual number is widely underestimated for both categories, due to various factors, including limited registration in the census or lack of documentation. In response to these needs, the RO.AS.IT. Association (Asociația Italianilor din România)²⁴ plays a crucial role, promoting Italian language courses as extracurricular activities. The association also publishes the magazine *Siamo di nuovo insieme*, symbolically titled, which serves as a tool for community cohesion, and organizes a series of events, competitions, and publications dedicated to Italian language and culture in Romania. Other smaller associations work to support the promotion of the Italian language and culture, but their activities remain limited compared to the community's needs. The lack of a structured and widespread educational offering in Italian outside Bucharest highlights an unmet need that requires greater investment and initiatives to respond to the growing demand for bilingual education and the desire to preserve Italian cultural identity among new generations.

¹⁹ Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Current Values of Education and Culture", în *Proceedings of the 23th International RAIS Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities*, August 15-16, 2021, Princeton, NJ, United States of America, pp. 87-92.

²⁰ Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale - Direzione Generale per la Promozione del Sistema Paese. 2020, *Scuole e sezioni italiane nel mondo. A.S. 2017/18*, Rome, MAECI, available at: https://www.esteri.it/mae/resource/doc/2020/11/scuole_e_sezioni_italiane_allestero_def.pdf.

²¹ <https://liceuldantealighieri.ro/>.

²² <https://neculce.ro/>.

²³ <http://www.colegiulbaritui.ro/>.

²⁴ <https://roasit.ro/>.

Conclusions

The long process of Italian language diffusion in Romania, with historical roots dating back to the medieval centuries, is a phenomenon that fits into a broader context of cultural, political, and economic exchanges between the two countries. From the early testimonies of Italian humanists, who observed the linguistic and cultural affinities between Latin and Romanian, the Italian language has played a fundamental role not only in the linguistic field but also in shaping Romania's cultural identity. This connection has evolved through centuries of interactions, beginning with diplomatic ties, moving through the influence of humanism²⁵, and culminating in the Transylvanian School's cultural movement and the promotion of Latinism as a distinctive element of Romanian identity.

Throughout the 19th century, the teaching of the Italian language in Romania became an integral part of the intellectual and professional training of the Romanian elite, helping to strengthen cultural ties with Italy. The period between the two world wars saw a true explosion of cultural and educational initiatives, such as Italian schools in Bucharest, cultural clubs, and the Italian Cultural Institute, which consolidated the presence of the Italian language and culture in Romania. The Italian influence had a profound impact on the Romanian educational and cultural landscape, both through academic institutions and through the formation of intellectuals and professionals who adopted Italian as a language of culture and social promotion²⁶.

Even during the communist period, despite political and ideological challenges, the teaching of Italian managed to maintain its relevance, albeit in more limited and controlled forms. The collapse of the communist regime gave new momentum to the teaching of the Italian language, with a renewed interest in Western culture and the restoration of cultural relations between Italy and Romania. Italian regained its status as a prestigious language in universities and schools, helping to intensify bilateral ties.

Moreover, in the contemporary context, the teaching of the Italian language in Romania continues to play a key role in shaping new generations of Romanians, not only in academia but also in professional relationships and the job market, where knowledge of Italian is often seen as an added value, particularly in relation to the strong economic and commercial ties between the two countries.

In summary, the phenomenon of teaching the Italian language in Romania represents an important dimension of a historical relationship that has evolved over the centuries, adapting to political, cultural, and economic changes. The Italian language, as a symbol of a shared cultural tradition and a deep historical bond, continues to play a fundamental role in strengthening relations between the two countries and contributes to promoting mutual understanding in an increasingly interconnected European context.

²⁵ Simion Belea, „Buber's dialogic principle and the base of human rights possible interferences”, *European Journal of Science and Theology* 8 (3), pp. 207-213.

²⁶ The significant role of the Italian language in facilitating post-1989 migration flows from Romania to Italy should not be overlooked. Many Romanians, seeking better employment opportunities, chose Italy as a destination where prior knowledge of Italian, or the relative ease of language acquisition upon arrival, played a crucial role in smoothing their integration into the Italian labor market and society. Indeed, language serves as an essential factor, enabling not only professional integration but also fostering broader social inclusion. See: Cfr. Miruna Căjvăneanu, Benedetto Coccia, Antonio Ricci (a cura di), *Radici a metà. Trent'anni di immigrazione romena in Italia/Rădăcini la jumătate. Trezeci de ani de imigrație românească în Italia*, Rome, IDOS, 2022.

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