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The Ruthenian Language in Serbia from the Perspective of Endangerment

Abstract: The paper explores the endangerment of the Ruthenian language in Serbia through a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative analyses of data obtained from a sociolinguistic questionnaire (*VLingS Questionnaire 1.0*; Mirić et al. 2025) completed by 78 members of the Ruthenian community. The field research was conducted in 2023 as part of the project "Vulnerable Languages and Linguistic Varieties in Serbia" (VLingS), funded by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia within the program IDEAS (2022–2024). The study presents findings from the quantitative analysis of responses related to the educational background of speakers (V_2, V_5), their emotional and attitudinal relationship to the Ruthenian language (XII_4, XII_5), and perspectives on language maintenance and revitalization (XIV_4, XIV_6, XIV_7). It further examines patterns of language use across different social domains (III_1_1–III_1_6) and the intergenerational transmission of the language (II_5, II_6, II_7). Notable discrepancies emerged between the respondents' declared attitudes and reported language practices, as well as between their stated values and actual engagement in preservation efforts. To address these inconsistencies, the paper includes a qualitative analysis of open-ended responses concerning language maintenance (XIV_5 and XIV_9), offering interpretative insights into the underlying sociolinguistic dynamics. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex factors affecting the sustainability of minority languages in multilingual settings.

Keywords: Ruthenian language, Rusyn language, Serbia, sociolinguistics, sociolinguistic questionnaire, language revitalisation, endangered languages, ethnic minorities, attitudes towards language, language use.

Ruthenians and their Language

The Ruthenians are Eastern Slavs by historical origin and Greek Catholics by religion. Nevertheless, linguists remain divided regarding the origin of the Rusyn/Ruthenian[1] language: some classify it as a West Slavic language, sup-

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[1] Although the use of different language designations—*Ruthenian* or *Rusyn*—may at times reflect an implicit (or explicit) position of the author regarding the origin and classification of the language (with Ruthenian typically implying a connection to Ukrainian origins and Rusyn sometimes used to emphasize the language's authenticity and to ex-

porting the pro-Slovak hypothesis; others consider Rusyn to be a distinct East Slavic language that may be viewed as a branch of Ukrainian; a third group argues that it is a separate East Slavic language formed at the intersection of East and West Slavic linguistic spheres. Today, Rusyn is regarded as the youngest Slavic standard language. It was codified in 1923 by Havryil Kostelnyk in his work Grammar of the Bačka Rusyn Speech (Popović 2010).

Aleksander Duličenko (2009) classifies the Rusyn language as a Slavic microlanguage of the insular type. By this, he refers to a language with a relatively small number of speakers that has undergone codification and exhibits established standard-language norms in the domains of phonetics, grammar, and lexicon, with a tendency toward further stabilization and standardization. Such a language is characterized by stylistic polyfunctionality within an organized and socially supported standard-language process.

Ljudmila Popović (2022) approaches the terms "small" and "large" language from a somewhat different perspective. She argues that a single language may simultaneously be regarded as both small and large, depending on the extent of its presence in the public life of a given society. The author begins from the thesis that every standard language can function in two variants: a dominant, majority variant, typically represented by the official language of a state, characterized by a standardized norm subject to stratification based on social and territorial factors; and a recessive, minority variant, which appears as a regional, minoritarian, ethnic, or non-territorial language within a country or a part of it, alongside another majority means of public communication. The author further outlines several scenarios in which the relationship between the dominant and recessive variants may shift or vary: (1) the dominant variant, due to geopolitical circumstances, becomes recessive and gradually disappears; (2) the dominant variant becomes recessive, but over time reorients toward a new standard and once again attains dominant status in accordance with it; (3) the dominant variant becomes recessive, reorients toward a new norm, and officially regains dominant status, but in practice remains recessive due to diglossia; (4) the language has functioned as a recessive variant since the emergence of its standard expression, maintaining this status throughout its development; (5) the recessive variant splits into several idioms that, in their further development, orient toward divergent standards; (6) the recessive variant develops according to an authentic norm, one with no analogue in any dominant variant, and gradually acquires dominant status; and (7) several closely related recessive variants form a koiné—a norm that may attain the status of a dominant variant. According to

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plicitly or implicitly sever ties with Ukrainian), both terms will be used interchangeably and concurrently in this paper, without any such ideological implications. The various scholarly positions on the Ruthenian/Rusyn language will be addressed only briefly.

the author, languages that are unified under a shared glottonym—Rusyn—yet differ fundamentally in terms of the standard to which they orient, may serve as an example of the fifth scenario outlined above.

While a similar variety is spoken in eastern Slovakia, southeast Poland, and the Transcarpathia region of western Ukraine, Vojvodina Rusyn is spoken in the Vojvodina region of Serbia and in Croatia. The first large enclave of Ruthenians immigrated to Banat and Bačka in the middle of the 18th century from the northeastern regions of Hungary. Nevertheless, January 17, 1751, was recorded as the day of the first mass wave of Ruthenian immigration to Vojvodina, when an agreement was signed on the immigration of 200 Ruthenian families to Ruski Krstur. The seats of Ruthenian colonies in Vojvodina – the villages of Ruski Krstur and Kucura and the city of Novi Sad became the centers of Ruthenian cultural and social life in the 20th century. Since 1973, the Ruthenian language has been one of the six official languages of Vojvodina. Today, the Ruthenians in Serbia have a National Council, the *Ruske Slovo* newspaper and publishing house, a Ruthenian editorial office at the Institute for Textbooks, the Institute for Culture, a radio program and TV shows. Ruthenians attend education in their language at all levels, including a preschool institution, three primary schools, the only grammar school in the world in the Ruthenian language, and the Department of the Ruthenian Language at the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad (Ramač 2002; Popović 2010; Fejsa 2012; Dražović 2018, 77–78).

Assessments of the Vulnerability of the Rusyn Language in Serbia

As reported by Sorescu-Marinković, Mirić, and Ćirković (2020), various global databases of vulnerable and endangered languages provide differing assessments of the Rusyn language. The authors note that according to UNESCO's Atlas, Vojvodina Rusyn is considered definitely endangered. It is spoken in Serbia and Croatia, more precisely in the region of Bačka in Vojvodina and the cross-border areas in Croatia. The estimated number of speakers is 30,000. On the other hand, Ethnologue locates Ruthenian[2] on the territory of South Bačka in Vojvodina, precisely in Ruski Krstur, with an estimated number of 11,300 speakers.[3]

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[2] https://www.ethnologue.com/language/rsk/. Accessed: September 1, 2025.

[3] The term *Rusyn* is used by Ethnologue only to designate the language spoken in Ukraine and Slovakia (Poland is not mentioned), and variant glottonyms are not provided (https://www.ethnologue.com/language/rue/. Accessed: September 1, 2025). Terminological note: the glottonyms Rusyn and Ruthenian are used almost interchangeably for both dialects of the Rusyn language: for the one in Serbia and Croatia, as well as for the one in Slovakia, Ukraine, and Poland. More specific glottonyms include Carpatho-Rusyn, which refers to the Rusyn language in the East (Slovakia, Ukraine, and Poland),

The status of Rusyn in Serbia is considered vigorous (level 6a), being guaranteed by the Statute of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina. Furthermore, it is noted that, regarding size and vitality, Rusyn is assessed as mid-sized and stable, i.e., not being sustained by formal institutions, but still the norm in the home and community, with all children learning and using the language.

VLingS Project and VLingS Questionnaire 1.0

Since the present research stems from a broader project dedicated to vulnerable languages, the following section provides an overview of its key features and objectives.

Vulnerable Languages and Linguistic Varieties in Serbia (VLingS)[4] was a research project supported by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia within the framework of the IDEAS Program. The project lasted 36 months, from January 2022 until December 2024. The project aimed to address the fact that, in recent decades, it became increasingly evident that numerous languages across the globe were facing the threat of extinction. In the context of Serbia, however, existing databases often provided inconsistent assessments of language endangerment and frequently lacked accurate or comprehensive data concerning the linguistic varieties spoken within the country. To address this gap, the primary objective of the project was to develop a reliable and precise instrument for evaluating the degree of language endangerment and vulnerability. This tool was applied to a statistically significant sample of speakers residing in Serbia. The instrument was tested on the following linguistic varieties, selected based on both international endangerment assessments and insights gained through our field research: Aromanian, Banat Bulgarian, Vojvodina Rusyn (Ruthenian), Judezmo (Ladino), Romani (Vlax and Balkan varieties), Megleno-Romanian, Vlach, and Bayash Romanian. The outcome was a scientifically grounded evaluation of the vitality and vulnerability of these varieties, providing a solid reference for future sociolinguistic research. A distinctive feature of the research was its dual methodological approach: in addition to administering a carefully designed sociolin-

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while for the one in Serbia (Western Bačka: Ruski Krstur, South Bačka: Kucura, Northern Bačka: Novo Orahovo, Srem: Šid, Berkasovo etc.) and Croatia the designations Vojvodinian Rusyn and Pannonian Rusyn are also used. The differentiation of Rusyn language varieties may be articulated in greater detail: the Bačka-Srem variant (in Serbia and in Croatia), the Prešov variant (in Slovakia), the Lemko variant (in Poland), and the Transcarpathian variant (in Ukraine) (Fejsa 2018b).

[4] More information about the VLingS project, the project team members, project results, and other related content can be found on the project's website: https://vlings.rs/ (accessed: May 29, 2025).

guistic questionnaire, the project included documenting and archiving spoken language samples across three generations of speakers. This comprehensive data collection enabled the creation of an encompassing linguistic database and an interactive digital map, offering detailed insights into the vulnerability of specific linguistic varieties within their respective communities.

The research presented in this paper is based on data collected during fieldwork conducted within the Rusyn community in Vojvodina in 2023, within the framework of the VLingS project. The study was carried out in three Rusyn communities from Serbia: Ruski Krstur, Kucura, and Novi Sad. Participants voluntarily took part in the study by agreeing to complete the *VLingS Questionnaire 1.0*, developed within the framework of the project (Mirić et al. 2025), and to engage in interviews with the researchers. A total of 78 respondents participated in the research. Each of the three communities in which the fieldwork was conducted was approximately equally represented, with participants of both genders and across all age groups. The questionnaire was completed in Serbian, and its English translation was published as an appendix to Mirić et al. 2025.

The main version of the questionnaire[5] includes 151 questions and subquestions divided into the following 16 sections (a detailed account of the questionnaire development process, as well as an explanation of why a new instrument was required for the project—despite the existence of related methodologies—is provided in Mirić et al. 2025):

I General data about linguonyms and language usage
II Data about language acquisition and intergenerational language transmission
III Domains of language usage
IV Literacy
V Education
VI Institutional support and linguistic landscape
VII Publications in the given language
VIII Media
IX Religious service
X Cultural events
XI Language level self-assessment
XII Respondents' feelings towards own language

[5] Prior to the development of the main version of the questionnaire, titled *VLingS Questionnaire 1.0*, an initial pilot version—*VLingS Questionnaire 0.0*—was created. This preliminary version comprised 190 questions and sub-questions, organized into sixteen thematic sections (for a detailed overview, see Mirić, Sokolovska and Sorescu-Marinković 2024).

XIII Ethnic and cultural identity
XIV Language maintenance and revitalization
XV Demographic information about the respondent
XVI Final remarks

Motivation for the Research

The impetus or inspiration for this research originated in 2023, during fieldwork conducted within the Rusyn community in Vojvodina. At that time, while administering questionnaires, it was observed that community members most frequently stated that Rusyn was their mother tongue or first language (see Mirić, Sokolovska and Sorescu-Marinković 2024), that they spoke it fluently, used it daily and whenever possible, and regarded it as an essential component of their identity. However, they simultaneously expressed regret over the gradual disappearance of their language, often criticizing parents who do not speak Rusyn with their children and remarking that little can now be done to revitalize it.

Census (PSDS 2022; Đurić et al. 2014, 151) data in Serbia unequivocally demonstrate a decline in the number of people reporting Rusyn as their mother tongue (2002: 13,458; 2011: 11,340; 2022: 8,725), a trend recognized by members of the Rusyn community themselves.

Results from the field study, based on a sample of 78 respondents belonging to the Rusyn community, indicate that 73 (93.59%) of participants believe that the Rusyn language is dying out. This perception contrasts with the responses of 67 (85.90%) participants who stated that all generations in Serbia, including children, speak the Rusyn language. In contrast, only 11 (14.10%) respondents indicated that the language is spoken primarily by the parental generation and older individuals.

The key question emerging from these findings is: Why is the language in decline if its speakers hold such strong and positive attitudes toward it? In other words, is there a connection between language attitudes and linguistic experience (schooling, social environment, stigmatization, etc.) on the one hand, and language behavior—that is, actual language use—on the other?

Previous Research

The Rusyn language in Vojvodina has been a subject of linguistic and other research continuously for over a century (e.g., Kostel'nik 1923; Kočiš 1978; Duličenko 2002; Popović 2019; Ilić 2021; Mudri 2022; Kwoka 2023).

The most recent comprehensive study on the degree of ethnolinguistic vitality of the Rusyn language in Serbia was conducted and published bilingually

by Biljana Dražović (2018). The research examines ethnolinguistic vitality based on the parameters proposed by UNESCO. Dražović (2018: 109) arrived at the following evaluations for each factor:

1. Intergenerational language transmission – score: 4
2. Absolute number of speakers – score: 3
3. Proportion of speakers within the total population – score: 3
4. Shifts in domains of language use – score: 4
5. Response to new domains and media – score: 3
6. Availability of materials for language learning and literacy – score: 5
7. Governmental and institutional attitudes, language policies, official status, and use – score: 4
8. Community members' attitudes toward their mother tongue – score: 5
9. Type and quality of language documentation – score: 4

Based on the arithmetic mean of the scores listed above, the ethnolinguistic vitality of the Rusyn language in Serbia is assessed as "good," with an average score of 3.88.

Although Dražović (2018, 109–113) discusses each of these evaluations in detail in the concluding section of her study, this paper will focus solely on the factors that received the lowest scores, as they represent the weakest links in the chain of efforts aimed at preserving and revitalizing the Rusyn language.

The author (Dražović 2018, 82–83, 91–92, 109) emphasizes that the most critical issue concerns the absolute number of speakers, that is, the number of members of the community, given that negative demographic trends—such as low fertility rates and ongoing migration—have also affected the Rusyn population. While these challenges are common across Serbia and impact the majority of its ethnic minorities, their consequences are particularly severe for the already small Rusyn community. Adverse socioeconomic conditions, low living standards, and an educational system insufficiently adapted to contemporary needs contribute to the increasing emigration of Rusyns to European countries, Canada, and the United States in search of better living conditions. The continuous decline in the overall number of Rusyn community members represents one of the greatest threats to the preservation and survival of the community itself, and, by extension, of the Rusyn language.

The low score associated with the share of Rusyn language speakers within the overall population (Dražović 2018, 83, 92–93, 110) can also be attributed to natural sociocultural processes, including interethnic marriages with members of other ethnic minorities and the geographic dispersion of the Rusyn population across the territory of the Republic of Serbia. Although Rusyn communities are predominantly concentrated in Vojvodina (e.g. Ruski Krstur, Kucura, Novi Sad, as well as Orahovo, and even Kula, Vrbas or others), individuals

are increasingly relocating to other parts of Serbia for various reasons—such as employment, family obligations, or education (see PSDS 2022, 27). Interethnic marriages inherently represent a challenging context for the consistent and sustained cultivation of the mother tongue and the development of satisfactory language competencies among younger generations. Rusyns residing in urban areas where they make up a negligible share of the population are compelled to use the dominant language in most societal domains in order to integrate into social structures and secure their basic human rights. As a result, younger individuals are increasingly less proficient in their language and more frequently identify another language—most commonly Serbian—as their first language. Although most Rusyns do not perceive proficiency in their language as a disadvantage in societal life, the dominant language is nevertheless regarded as the sole instrument of social and economic advancement, which contributes to the growing phenomenon of ethnolinguistic mismatch or alloglot Serbian language speakers within the Rusyn community, particularly pronounced among the younger population.

Another parameter indicating the precarious status of the Rusyn language is its limited capacity to adapt to new domains and modern media (Dražović 2018). Under the growing influence of globalization and the privileging of dominant world languages, Rusyn has failed to establish an equal and meaningful presence in these spheres, thereby halting its linguistic modernization and impeding the development of its full functional potential. Although the language is used in the media in accordance with legal provisions that guarantee national minorities the right to information in their mother tongue, substantial structural and content-related shortcomings are evident. Inadequate technical infrastructure within the editorial offices responsible for producing radio and television programming in the Rusyn language, combined with a narrow thematic orientation primarily centered on folklore and tradition, results in content that does not adequately reflect the interests or communicative needs of the younger, modern Rusyn population. The severely limited online presence of the Rusyn language constitutes a critical shortfall, the long-term consequences of which may pose a serious threat to the language's vitality.

The Scope and Aim of the Study

To address the question posed in the section *Motivation for the research*, namely "Why is the language in decline if its speakers hold such strong and positive attitudes toward it?", I selected key, representative questions from the following sections of the *VLingS Questionnaire 1.0*: *V Education* (V_2, V_5), *II Data about language acquisition and intergenerational language transmission* (II_5, II_6, II_7), *XII Respondents' feelings towards own language* (XII_4, XII_5), and *XIII Eth-*

nic and cultural identity (XIII_1, XIII_2), and conducted a quantitative analysis (descriptive statistics), as predominantly positive responses to these questions would typically be expected to indicate language vitality (Ehala 2011; Sokolović 2014, 2015; Fejsa 2018a; Sorescu-Marinković, Mirić and Ćirković 2020; Mirić 2023).

What prompted this study, however, was precisely the discrepancy between the responses to these selected questions (which, as will be shown below, are almost entirely positive and consistent) and the responses to questions from two other sections of sections of the *VLingS Questionnaire 1.0*, precisely *III Domains of language usage* (III_1_1–III_1_6) and *XIV Language maintenance and revitalization* (XIV_4, XIV_6, XIV_7, XIV_8), which were also subjected to quantitative analysis.

In the discussion following the presentation of the quantitative results, I propose a possible explanation for this discrepancy. This discussion will be supplemented with a qualitative analysis of the descriptive answers to the questions from the section *XIV Language maintenance and revitalization* (XIV_5 and XIV_9).

Quantitative analysis of responses to selected questions from the *VLingS Questionnaire 1.0*

V Education		
V_2: Did you learn your language as a separate subject at school in Serbia?		
1. **YES 71/78 (91.03 %)**	2. NO 7/78 (8.97 %)	3. I didn't go to school 0/78 (0 %)
V_5: Has anyone in your family studied your language as a separate subject at school (in Serbia)?		
1. **YES 74/78 (94.87 %)**	2. NO 3/78 (3.85 %)	3. I don't know 1/78 (1.28 %)

II Data about language acquisition and integrational language transmission		
II_5: If you have children, do they speak your language?		48/78 (61.54 %)
1. No, they don't speak the language.		1/48 (2.08 %)
2. Yes, they can use some words.		5/48 (10.42 %)
3. Yes, they can use simple sentences.		0/48 (0 %)
4. Yes, they speak the language fluently.		**42/48 (87.50 %)**
5. I don't know if they speak the language.		0/48 (0 %)
II_6: If you have children, in which language do you communicate with them?		
Rusyn 37/48 (77.08 %)	Serbian 6/48 (12.50 %)	Both Serbian and Rusyn 5/48 (10.42 %)
II_7: If you have grandchildren, do they speak your language?		19/78 (24.36 %)
1. No, they don't speak the language.		1/19 (5.26 %)
2. Yes, they can use some words.		1/19 (5.26 %)

3. Yes, they can use simple sentences.	3/19 (15.79 %)
4. **Yes, they speak the language fluently.**	**14/19 (73.68 %)**
5. I don't know if they speak the language.	0/19 (0 %)

XII Respondents' feelings towards own language		
XII_4: Has anyone ever prohibited you from speaking your language?		
1. YES 7/78 (8.97 %)	**2. NO 71/78 (91.03 %)**	3. I don't know 0 (0 %)
XII_5: Has anyone ever prohibited members of your family from speaking your language?		
1.YES 7/78 (8.97 %)	**2. NO 66/78 (84.62 %)**	3. I don't know 5 (6.41 %)

XIII Ethnic and cultural identity		
XIII_1: Do you think your language is important?		
1. YES 73/78 (93.59 %)	2. Partially 5/78 (6.41 %)	3. NO 0 (0 %)
XIII_2: Does your language represent your community and the culture of your community?		
1. YES 78/78 (100 %)	2. Partially 0 (0 %)	3. NO 0 (0 %)

III Domains of language usage					
III_1: How often do you use your language in conversations with the following persons or in the following situations?					
Always	**Often**	**Sometimes**	**Rarely**	**Never**	**N/A**
1. With family members					
66 (84.62 %)	6 (7.69 %)	5 (6.41 %)	1 (1.28 %)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)
2. With friends					
32 (41.03 %)	**31 (39.74 %)**	**11 (14.10 %)**	4 (5.13 %)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)
3. With neighbours					
38 (48.72 %)	**13 (16.67 %)**	**8 (10.26 %)**	**10 (12.82 %)**	**9 (11.54 %)**	0 (0 %)
4. With colleagues at work					
17 (21.79 %)	9 (11.54 %)	9 (11.54 %)	7 (8.97 %)	**16 (20.51 %)**	**20 (25.64 %)**
5. With members of the clergy					
61 (78.21 %)	2 (2.56 %)	2 (2.56 %)	3 (3.85 %)	3 (3.85 %)	**7 (8.97 %)**
6. With public officials (e.g. at the municipality/local community/post office/police)					
8 (10.26 %)	4 (5.13 %)	**15 (19.23 %)**	**25 (32.05 %)**	**26 (33.33 %)**	0 (0 %)

XIV Language maintenance and revitalisation		
XIV_4: Is it important to you to preserve/revitalize (or learn) your language?		
1. YES 77/78 (98.72 %)	2. NO 0 (0 %)	3. It doesn't matter to me 1/78 (1.28 %)
XIV_6: Is it important to you that your language is passed on to younger generations?		
1. YES 78/78 (100 %)	2. NO 0 (0 %)	3. It doesn't matter to me 0 (0 %)
XIV_7: Is it important to you that your language is introduced or maintained in schools in Serbia?		

1. YES 77/78 (98.72 %)	2. NO 0 (0 %)	3. It doesn't matter to me 1/78 (1.28 %)
XIV_8: Is your language disappearing?		
1. YES 73/78 (93.59 %)	2. NO 4/78 (5.13 %)	3. I don't know 1/78 (1.28 %)

The presented results indicate that 91.03% of respondents studied the Rusyn language in school, and that in 94.87% of cases, at least one other family member has also received formal education in Rusyn. Among these respondents are individuals who attended schools where Rusyn was the medium of instruction, as well as those who were enrolled in the subject Rusyn Language with Elements of National Culture or a similar course, depending on their year of birth and the period during which they attended school.

Regarding the intergenerational transmission of the language, 48 out of 78 respondents reported having children. Among their children, 87.50% are reported as fluent in Rusyn, 10.42% can use some words, and 2.08%—i.e., the child or children of a single respondent—do not speak the Rusyn language at all. Furthermore, 77.08% of respondents communicate exclusively in Rusyn with their children, 10.42% use both Rusyn and Serbian, while 12.50% speak only Serbian with their children. Out of all 78 respondents, 19 have grandchildren, of whom 73.68% are fluent speakers of Rusyn.

In response to the question of whether they have ever been prohibited from expressing themselves in the Rusyn language, 91.03% of respondents reported no such negative experiences, while 8.97% did report having encountered such restrictions. Among the seven reported cases (8.97%) of language prohibition, two occurred within the family—imposed by family members who do not understand Rusyn, typically in the context of mixed marriages—one occurred in the school setting (though it was not specified whether the restriction came from teachers or peers), one respondent declined to provide details ("not worth mentioning"), one case involved "malicious children in the street," another referred to "the neighborhood," and one respondent stated that such incidents occurred during the wars of the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia. When asked whether they were aware of any family members having experienced such prohibitions, 6.41% responded that they did not know, 84.62% indicated that there had been no such instances, while 8.97%—again, seven cases—reported that they knew of family members who had been prohibited from using the Rusyn language. Of these seven cases, one respondent stated that the restriction had been directed at their daughter, while six respondents referred to the period of forced Magyarization at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. It is important to note that these instances were not related to repression by members of the Serbian majority population or the authorities of the Republic of Serbia.

With regard to ethnic and cultural identity, the responses were overwhelmingly positive. A total of 93.59% of respondents stated that their language is important to them, while 6.41% considered it to be only partially important—typically qualifying their response out of respect for other languages, noting that while Rusyn is indeed important, other languages also hold significance. All respondents unanimously agreed that the Rusyn language represents their community and its culture (100%).

The question regarding the domains of language use initially caused some confusion among respondents. Without additional clarification on how to approach this question, most participants would have selected the response "Always" across all items, based on the assumption that they communicate exclusively with individuals who speak Rusyn. It was only after the researchers explained that they should consider communication with all individuals they regard as friends—and then, based on the totality of that communication, determine the approximate frequency of speaking Rusyn with friends—that more nuanced and accurate responses were obtained. This perception stems from an unwritten rule within the linguistic behavior of members of the Rusyn community: namely, that the Rusyn language, as a matter of politeness and respect for all participants in an interaction, is used only under so-called ideal conditions—that is, when all interlocutors are proficient in Rusyn and agree to use it as the language of communication. This is a rare occurrence in groups larger than three people.

The results of our questionnaire indicate that the highest frequency of Rusyn language use occurs within the family and in interactions with representatives of the Greek Catholic Church. Within the family, 84.62% of respondents speak exclusively in Rusyn, while an additional 7.69% report frequent use. In communication with church representatives, 78.21% of respondents always speak Rusyn, 2.56% frequently, another 2.56% occasionally, 3.85% rarely, and 3.85% never. Additionally, 8.97% of respondents reported not attending church at all, and their answers were classified as *not applicable* to this question. The situation is more varied in conversations with neighbors and friends (who are often the same individuals). Nevertheless, 48.72% of respondents reported using only Rusyn in their immediate non-family environment (i.e., with neighbors), while 41.03% reported speaking exclusively Rusyn with friends. The lowest frequency of language use was recorded in public institutions and workplace settings. At work, 20.51% of respondents reported never using Rusyn, although 21.79% reported always using it—an outcome clearly dependent on the specific work environment. In public institutions, 33.33% of respondents reported never using Rusyn, 32.05% reported rare usage, and 19.23% reported occasional use. When asked why this was the case, respondents explained that there was simply no need to use Rusyn in such settings, as they are fluent in Serbian. Moreover,

in public institutions, the priority is to efficiently complete one's business, and therefore, conversations are typically initiated in Serbian.

Finally, the analysis arrived at the responses concerning the preservation and revitalization of the Rusyn language. All respondents unanimously agreed on the importance of transmitting the language to younger generations (100%). Nearly all participants indicated that maintaining or improving their own proficiency in Rusyn was important to them (77 out of 78 respondents, or 98.72%), and an identical share (98.72%) expressed the view that the Rusyn language should be retained in schools where it is currently taught and introduced in schools where it is not yet available.

Despite all the positive indicators suggesting that the Rusyn language is highly vital, only 4 out of 78 respondents (5.13%) believe that the vitality of the Rusyn language is stable. One respondent was unable to assess the language's vitality, while as many as 73 out of 78 respondents (93.59%) expressed a strong conviction that the Rusyn language is in decline.

Discussion

The results presented give rise to two central questions: (1) Why is the Rusyn language in decline, that is, what factors in practice override the respondents' positive attitudes toward its use? and (2) How can the striking uniformity in respondents' answers be explained?

In the present section, we will first address the extent to which language attitudes influence language behavior. We will then propose a possible explanation for the consistency observed in our respondents' answers. Finally, we will incorporate into the analysis the descriptive responses to the questions related to the survival and revitalization of the Rusyn language, in which participants elaborate on the importance of maintaining or learning the Rusyn language from a personal perspective and offer suggestions that could contribute to its revitalization (XIV Language maintenance and revitalisation: 5. Why is it important (to preserve/revitalise (or learn) your language)? 9. What do you think should be done to preserve or revitalise your language?).

In psychological research, correlation is tested by examining whether changes in one variable are accompanied by changes in another, and if so, the relationship—measured by a correlation coefficient (r) ranging from -1 to 1—is considered positive when both variables increase together, negative when one increases as the other decreases, and absent when no consistent pattern is observed (Kostić 2014: 13). The initial aim of our study was to examine potential correlations between variables related to language attitudes—specifically regarding language preservation and revitalization (XIV_4, XIV_6, XIV_7), speakers' emotional attachment to their language (XII_4, XII_5), and education (V_2,

V_5)—on the one hand, and variables related to language behavior—namely, domains of language use (III_1_1 through III_1_6) and intergenerational language transmission (II_5, II_6, II_7)—on the other. However, as evident from the results presented, the responses concerning language attitudes were almost entirely uniform (and overwhelmingly positive), which limited the possibility of establishing meaningful correlations between the two sets of variables.

An overview of theoretical approaches and research on attitudes in general is systematically presented in the work of Sanja Mikatić Subotić (2024; for further discussion and comparable findings on this topic, see, for instance Ajzen and Fishbein 1977, 2000; Guerin and Foster 1994; Ladegaard 2000; Paunović 2009). She informs us that attitudes can be understood from both behaviorist and mentalist perspectives. The behaviorist approach, according to the author, is criticized for overemphasizing the attitude–behavior relationship and for treating attitudes as mere behavioral reactions of individuals to social situations (this premise served as a starting point for our own research—indeed, the very disconnect between attitude and behavior inspired us to explore the issue further). In contrast, mentalists conceptualize attitudes as a tripartite structure consisting of affective (emotional), cognitive (intellectual), and behavioral components. The affective component refers to the emotional responses elicited by the attitude object (in our case, the Rusyn language); the cognitive component encompasses beliefs, knowledge, and perceptions regarding the object (this component appeared highly developed among our respondents); while the behavioral component implies actions directed toward the attitude object. For nearly a century, empirical studies have consistently demonstrated weak or negligible correlations between attitude predictors and behavioral criteria. These findings led many researchers to question the nature of the attitude–behavior relationship. The general consensus that emerged was that attitudes exert only a limited influence on behavior prediction. While this conclusion may appear surprising, it should not be. If attitudes or knowledge about a particular phenomenon were sufficient to modify behavior, none of us would engage in undesirable actions—ranging from severe forms such as substance abuse to more common habits like overeating or smoking (these being some of the most obvious examples). The author further notes that a more recent conclusion within this field is that attitudes represent only one of many factors influencing behavior. While this acknowledges the continued relevance of attitudes, it also underscores that attitudes alone are often not directly linked to behavioral outcomes.

Based on the quantitative data presented, one might even conclude that, in the case of the Rusyn community, the predictability of language behavior based on language attitudes is relatively high. However, we would like to offer several critical remarks that may help us avoid relying on such a one-dimensional interpretation. Following the direction proposed by Jelena Filipović (2018,

10), it is important to shift our analytical focus toward the concepts of cultural models and ideologies, as these fundamentally shape the attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, emotions, and responses of members of a speech community. Understanding the patterns of linguistic interaction thus provides a clearer insight into the structure of these cultural models and reveals the underlying ideology that informs speakers' perceptions of reality.

First and foremost, when examining responses related to language attitudes and personal feelings toward the language, a degree of stereotypicality is observed. By stereotypical responses, we refer to what some authors describe as attitudes and beliefs, or what Jelena Filipović terms ideology (Filipović 2018, 15; see also Bugarski 1996, 102). Filipović defines language ideology as "systemic, mental (and often implicit) structures that enable speakers to understand, apply, and/or modify the linguistic conventions of their sociocultural community" (Filipović 2018, 22; cf. Silverstein 1979 and Woolard and Schieffelin 1994). It is important, however, to distinguish between the concepts of attitudes and beliefs, which pertain to the individual (cf. prototype in Popović 2018, 63), and language ideologies and stereotypes, which are social constructs. If we follow Popović (2008, 63; see also Paunović Rodić 2019, 44), we may define stereotypical responses as those that reflect generalized, community-wide value systems shared by individuals as members of that community. What does this actually imply? For instance, if one asks a child whether they will behave well, the child will most likely respond affirmatively, because they know they are expected to do so. Similarly, when a member of a community is asked whether the preservation and revitalization of the Rusyn language is important to them, they are likely to respond affirmatively—not necessarily as an expression of actual behavior or commitment, but as a reflection of a learned, internalized, and affirming attitude toward their community, heritage, and language, which are all perceived as essential components of personal identity.

We would like to propose an additional possible explanation for the remarkable consistency observed in respondents' answers concerning language attitudes. The Rusyn community is relatively small and somewhat closed. Those who actively use the Rusyn language and participate in community life were more inclined to take part in our research, whereas it proved significantly more difficult to reach other potential respondents.[6] The reluctance of community members who do not possess sufficient proficiency in Rusyn (as self-assessed), who may have become distanced from the community, or whose life circumstances prevent them from using the language more frequently and effectively,

[6] This certainly represents a limitation of the presented research and has likely influenced the overall results; however, by consciously incorporating this fact into the interpretation of the data, it is possible to arrive at sound and reliable conclusions.

should not be interpreted solely as a lack of interest. It is highly likely—and we encountered such situations during fieldwork—that within the community, both proficiency in Rusyn and active involvement in communal life continue to carry a certain degree of prestige (see, for example, Bugarski 1996, 104–107). Consequently, individuals who, for various reasons, cannot claim fluency in the language or who are not involved in organizing cultural or socially beneficial events may feel excluded or unworthy of participation in the study, as they do not perceive themselves as sufficiently legitimate members of the community. As noted by Popović (2022), drawing on the functional perspective of sociolinguist John Edwards, it is essential to distinguish between the instrumental and sentimental functions of language—where the latter is primarily associated with the expression and preservation of ethnic identity (Edwards 1994, 128; cf. *cultural loyalty* vs. *language loyalty* in Edwards 1994, 112)—which, in the context of recessive linguistic varieties, often overshadow other functions. Among these members of the community, this sentimental attachment to the language may remain particularly strong.

A qualitative analysis of the descriptive responses to the questions within the section XIV Language maintenance and revitalisation: 5. Why is it important (to preserve/revitalise (or learn) your language)? 9. What do you think should be done to preserve or revitalise your language? may provide deeper insight into a possible answer to the question of why the Rusyn language is in decline—that is, what factors in practice undermine the respondents' otherwise positive attitudes toward its use, as perceived from the perspective of the respondents themselves. The responses to the first question (XIV_5: Why is it important (to preserve/revitalise (or learn) your language)?) reveal that the Rusyn language is regarded as an essential and inseparable part of the respondents' identity. Additionally, respondents often emphasize their attachment to the language as an expression of love and respect for their parents, ancestors, and cultural heritage. Responses to the second question (XIV_9: What do you think should be done to preserve or revitalise your language?) reflect a range of suggestions for community engagement—many of which are, in fact, already being implemented—such as introducing the language into school curricula, publishing books, and creating interactive, multimedia, and television content for children in Rusyn. However, the overwhelming majority of respondents point to (young) parents as the main agents of language loss, criticizing them for not speaking Rusyn with their children at home and for failing to enrol them in schools offering instruction in the Rusyn language.

If we set aside factors such as natural migration, broader societal conditions, and mixed marriages—elements of life that cannot or should not be externally regulated—we are left with the finding that nearly all respondents place responsibility on parents, who, in their view, do not devote sufficient attention

to transmitting the language to their children or tend to give up on this effort too easily. On the one hand, although a significant number of Rusyns live and work in Novi Sad, they are not concentrated in a single area but are instead dispersed throughout the city. As a result, in neighborhoods where the minimum number of pupils (typically five) required to offer the subject Rusyn Language with Elements of National Culture is not met, instruction is organized in more distant schools—creating additional logistical challenges for parents. On the other hand, in communities where complete primary and secondary education in the Rusyn language is available, parents increasingly choose to enrol their children in Serbian-language classes. Their rationale is to ensure that children from predominantly Rusyn-speaking environments acquire Serbian as early as possible—the language in which they will continue their formal education.

Concluding Remarks

This study, based on data collected through the *VLingS Questionnaire 1.0* during fieldwork among members of the Rusyn community in Serbia, analyzed both quantitative (descriptive statistics) and qualitative responses concerning language education, intergenerational transmission, domains of use, and attitudes toward language preservation and revitalization. The findings reveal a striking discrepancy between respondents' overwhelmingly positive attitudes toward the Rusyn language and the observable patterns of its use and transmission. Quantitative data demonstrate that respondents strongly affirm the importance of Rusyn as a marker of cultural identity and heritage, that they support its presence in schools, and that they value its intergenerational transmission. At the same time, however, the language shows reduced vitality in everyday domains beyond the family and church, and nearly all respondents acknowledge its decline. This gap can be explained by several factors. On the one hand, the consistency of positive responses may reflect learned, community-wide ideologies and stereotypes, in which affirming the value of Rusyn is tied to collective identity and cultural loyalty, rather than to individual language behavior. On the other hand, qualitative evidence points to practical obstacles—such as parental choices, urban dispersion, and logistical difficulties in accessing Rusyn-language education—that weaken intergenerational transmission. Thus, while sentimental attachment to Rusyn remains strong, instrumental use is increasingly limited, leaving the vitality of the language dependent less on attitudes in principle than on concrete, context-specific practices in daily life and education.

We would like to emphasize that the current state of Rusyn language vitality is by no means hopeless. The Rusyn community continues to foster a wide range of cultural and folkloric events, which remain well-attended and closely followed. Many young people and enthusiasts are actively involved in cultural

and artistic societies in Ruski Krstur, Kucura, Orahovo and other villages, where all interested individuals—children, youth, and the elderly—have the opportunity to engage in activities that promote Rusyn culture and language. Of particular importance is the Rusyn Cultural Center in Novi Sad, which, in addition to organized activities, brings together primarily a student population—both Rusyn and non-Rusyn—and introduces the Rusyn language and culture to a broader audience in an informal and accessible manner through social interaction. Although the Rusyn language is being lost among some speakers, as it ceases to serve as a means of communication even within the immediate environment due to various life circumstances (such as relocation or a change of surroundings for marriage, employment, etc.), in environments where it is still used spontaneously and naturally within the community and in family contexts, it continues to evolve like any modern language, enriching and adapting its forms across all linguistic levels, and thus remains a living and dynamic system (see e.g. Fejsa 2020).

However, we wish to express a note of caution: rigid or purist attitudes toward the "correct" or "proper" use of the Rusyn language—such as criticism directed at young speakers for using Anglicism or other externally influenced forms, or at young parents for making practical decisions that facilitate everyday life—may risk alienating certain members of the community. For this reason, we advocate for understanding and support rather than judgment and exclusion.

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