

# ROMANIA IN THE ITALIAN ODONYMIC LANDSCAPE

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10.52846/SCOL.2023.1-2.02

## **Abstract**

This article examines the street names (odonyms) which refer to Romania in the Italian odonymic repertoire, examining the typology and motivations underlying their creation. From the analysis, it appears that the identified names belong to the category of toponyms and anthroponyms, and that in the Italian context of street names they were assigned for encyclopaedic or celebratory-commemorative purposes. For the latter, places and important figures were chosen for their ties to centres that included them in their street name repertoire.

**Keywords:** *street names, toponyms, anthroponyms, Italian, Romania*

## **Résumé**

Cet article examine les noms de rues (odonymes) qui font référence à la Roumanie dans le répertoire odonymique italien, en examinant la typologie et les motivations qui sous-tendent leur création. De l'analyse, il ressort que les noms identifiés appartiennent à la catégorie des toponymes et des anthroponymes et que, dans le contexte italien des noms de rues, ils ont été attribués à des fins encyclopédiques ou célébratoire-commémoratives. Pour ces derniers, les lieux et les personnages importants ont été choisis pour leurs liens avec les centres qui les incluaient dans leur répertoire odonymique.

**Mots-clés:** *noms de rues, toponymes, anthroponymes, italien, Roumanie*

Following the well-reconstructed historic phases of Italian street naming practices by Raffaelli (2010), 1861, the year of Italy's unification, marks the moment in which exogenous street names, assigned by or at least approved by the authorities, began to become more widespread and are distinguished by their celebratory and commemorative function. This process would lead to the progressive disappearance of the traditional onymic repertoire characterized by names of a descriptive nature and an endogenous matrix. Consequently, from that moment on, the street names chosen to re-baptize streets and squares in urban centres or to give names to new neighbourhoods connote cultural and ideological values reflecting the various phases

of Italian history and society. In this way, the areas of urban circulation are transformed into “a sort of monument, open-air museum, a gigantic pantheon that honours the public memory” (Caffarelli 2005: 17-18), for the specific and didactic purpose of celebrating and commemorating people, moments, places and values that are particularly meaningful to the Italian population. Thus over more than a century and a half of history, a corpus of street names was formed and, according to the detailed study directed by Caffarelli of the most frequently used street names (Caffarelli 1998), has generated a catalogue reflecting the famous motto depicting Italians as a people of heroes, saints, poets and navigators within a repertoire naturally orientated to honouring and remembering, above all, the national glories and events. In this context, few are the street names dedicated to foreign figures, foreign places and memorable events not directly linked to national events. In any case, they remain meaningful and above all, reveal various orientations in matters of recent street naming choices. In this regard, in honour of my dear friend and fine scholar Florica Dimitrescu, in this brief essay, I would like to review and analyse the street signs dedicated to Romania in the Italian municipality street directories<sup>1</sup>.

As a whole, there are eighty-one odonyms identified and they are grouped in two main macro-categories of proper names: toponyms (divided into subcategories of names of states, cities and regions) and names of famous figures. In the first group of names, the toponym *Romania*<sup>2</sup> stands out for the number of occurrences (57), and in terms of the kind of the area of circulation, it is primarily related *via* (52 occurrences), *viale* (2 occurrences), *largo* (2 occurrences) and *corso* (1 occurrence). In the Italian street naming system, these designations identify different types of referents: *via* (from Lat. *vīa(m)* ‘street; way’) is the common term for a city street of relatively limited width and various lengths, for the transit and circulation of people and vehicles; *viale* (derived from *via*) indicates a wide urban or suburban street which, for the most part, is lined with trees and often divided into two, three or more lanes by central reservations; *largo* (from Lat. *largu(m)* ‘wide’) indicates an area similar to a small square, where various streets intersect or the street widens, and it is principally used for transit rather than as a meeting place; finally, the word *corso* (from Lat. *cūrsu(m)* ‘race; path’) identifies a particularly important urban street for its age-old tradition or its urban function and nature; it is very busy and usually

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<sup>1</sup> This study is based on data obtained by querying the site <https://vie.openalfa.it/>. Since this is an empiric study conducted by inserting in the search box names (toponyms, chrononyms, names of people, etc) considered likely to return street names, some occurrences related to Romania may have eluded the query.

<sup>2</sup> From the analysis of the onomastic frequencies conducted on the Italian repertoire of street names in 1998 (Caffarelli 1998: 632) only three foreign nations (France, Belgium and Spain) were found to exceed 100 occurrences.

located in the city centre, surrounded by shops. The prevalence of the appellation *via* suggests that the street name *via Romania* is generally assigned to a city street that is not very wide and often short to medium in length, as can be seen when consulting street directories of towns displaying this name.

In terms of geographical distribution, street names formed from *Romania* are present in sixteen of the twenty Italian regions, exhibiting the highest number of occurrences in Lazio<sup>3</sup> and in Sicily<sup>4</sup> where we find 7 occurrences; Tuscany follows<sup>5</sup> with 6, Emilia Romagna<sup>6</sup> with 5, Apulia<sup>7</sup> and Abruzzo<sup>8</sup> with 3, Piedmont<sup>9</sup>, Lombardy<sup>10</sup>, Umbria<sup>11</sup>, Sardinia<sup>12</sup>, Basilicata<sup>13</sup>, Calabria<sup>14</sup> with 2, and finally Veneto<sup>15</sup>, Marche<sup>16</sup>, Campania<sup>17</sup> and Molise<sup>18</sup> with 1. Most of these names do not have a commemorative purpose and find a place among the exogenous denominations labelled by Raffaelli as “neutral”. They became popular in the 1960s after the expansion of the urban fabric of many cities and towns and were marked by homogenous street name subsystems assimilable to “entries in an open-air encyclopaedia.” (Raffaelli 2010:451). Thus, *via Romania* is generally found in areas of more recent construction and in a street naming context dedicated to names of European nations, often found together with names from neighbouring states or, more generally, from Eastern Europe<sup>19</sup>. In some cases, as in Florence, in quarter 3, Badia a Ripoli, and in Grosseto (in an area called Villaggio Europa), streets named after European nations branch off from the guiding principle *Viale Europe*. In

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<sup>3</sup> In Fondi (LT), Pomezia (Roma), Alatri (FR), Albano Laziale (Roma), Aprilia (LT); in Formello (Rome) *Viale Romania*; in Rome *Viale Romania*, a long street that runs off Piazza Ungheria, located in the quarter of Parioli.

<sup>4</sup> In Ragusa, Favara (AG), Biancavilla (CT), Petrosino (TP), Palermo, Gela, Belpasso (CT).

<sup>5</sup> In Poggibonsi (SI), Scopaia (LI), Figline and Incisa Valdarno (FI), Scandicci-Lastra in Signa (FI), Firenze, Grosseto.

<sup>6</sup> In Rimini, Comacchio (FE), Carpi (MO), Crocetta-San Lazzaro-Modena Est, Pieve Modolena (RE).

<sup>7</sup> In Bozzano (BR), Barletta (FG); in Trani (FG) *Largo Romania*.

<sup>8</sup> In Avezzano (AQ), Pineto (TE), Roseto degli Abruzzi (TE).

<sup>9</sup> In Vercelli; in Torino *Corso Romania*.

<sup>10</sup> In Castel Goffredo (MT); in Ispra (VA) *Largo Romania*.

<sup>11</sup> In Spoleto (PG), Bastia Umbra (PG).

<sup>12</sup> In Quartu Sant’Elena (CA), Olbia.

<sup>13</sup> In Borgo Venusio (MT), Tursi (MT).

<sup>14</sup> In Maiorano (KRH), Corigliano-Rossano (CS).

<sup>15</sup> In Padua.

<sup>16</sup> In Jesi (AN).

<sup>17</sup> In Sant’Antimo (NA).

<sup>18</sup> In Santa Croce di Magliano (CB).

<sup>19</sup> The most frequent are *via Bulgaria* and *via Ungheria*, but often anachronistic labels like *via Cecoslovacchia* and *via Jugoslavia* are also found.

Vercelli, the only choronymic name found is near *via Romania*, namely, *via Transilvania*. In Turin, *corso Romania* does not fit into this encyclopaedic tradition. It identifies a portion of *corso Vercelli* that was renamed in 1977 to clearly honour the Romanian state.

Aprilia offers a particular solution. The streets named after the states are placed near others dedicated to their respective capitals; indeed, *via Romania* leads to *via Bucarest*, *via Bulgaria* is with *via Sofia* and so forth. Thus, if the organizing criterion used by the administrators of Aprilia was the group of nations and their European capitals, the other ten occurrences of *via Bucharest* in Italy fit into a subgroup that we can define as “capital cities of Europe”<sup>20</sup>. This is what can be found in Adrano (CT), Soletto (LE), Porto Cesareo (LE), Andria (Barletta, Andria and Trani), Ladispoli (Roma), Bastia Umbra (PG), Rimini, Castel Goffredo (MN), Cagliari and Latina. Other occurrences that correspond to the same model include *largo Bucarest* in Santa Margherita di Belice (AG), and in the same neighbourhood *largo Bratislava*, and *piazzale*<sup>21</sup> *Bucarest* in Potenza, located between another two large squares (*piazzali*) dedicated to Zagreb and Sofia. The only name choice that does not seem to be governed by an encyclopaedic model is *piazza Bucarest* in Rome that indicates a square in the ancient quarter Campo Marzio, situated inside of the Giardini del Pincio.

Continuing our review of city names, we find some other names freed from homogenous semantic blocks and that do not correspond to the classification and nomenclature of the preceding group. Rather, they have a commemorative function. In fact, poleonyms have been chosen to highlight the twinning projects established by various Italian municipalities with Romanian centres: the toponymy thus becomes a tool meant to symbolically affirm the link between the cities involved and, at the same time, an important sign of cultural and social unity in contexts marked by a large number of Romanian communities<sup>22</sup>. Included in this group are *via/rue Sinaia* in Aosta, twinned with Sinaia since the end of the 1960s, *piazza Pitesti* in Caserta, twinned with Pitești since 1972, *via Tulcea* in Rovigo, a small town twinned with Tulcea since 2003 and *piazzale Alba Iulia* in Alessandria,

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<sup>20</sup> As Caffarelli found (Caffarelli 1998: 631), the most frequently recurring names of foreign cities refer to places that pertain to Italy or that commemorate battles, and among the street names with over one hundred occurrences large foreign cities like Paris, London, Madrid, New York, etc. do not appear.

<sup>21</sup> The term *piazzale* (derived from *piazza*, from Lat. *platea(m)*) mostly indicates an irregular shaped square, usually on the edge of town, or originally suburban, which later became part of the town following the new urban development of the city. (see Treccani: *piazzale*).

<sup>22</sup> It should be noted that in Italy the Romanians represent the most numerous foreign community with 1,083,771 residents (Istat data, 2023: [http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCIS\\_POPSTRRES1](http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCIS_POPSTRRES1)).

twinned with Alba Iulia since 2008. In this Piedmontese town, to underscore the symbolic name of the square located near the station, in 2009 a statue of the Capitoline Wolf was installed. The statue was a gift from the city of Alba Iulia and a copy of the one that stands in the Romanian centre in the square dedicated to Alessandria (*piața Alessandria*), a tangible sign of friendship and institutional collaboration between the two communities.

If the greatest number of odonyms concerns toponyms, in the group of street names “of Rumanian flavour” a few famous figures also appear. They have been included in the local onomastic tradition because of the particular ties they created with some Italian communities<sup>23</sup>. *Via Vasile Alecsandri*, situated in Torino in the quarter Pozzo Strada, is included in this tradition and honours the famous man of letters, the politician and diplomat from the Nineteenth century. The naming, which occurred in 1977, was not random, but endogenously motivated, intending to celebrate a figure who had established important diplomatic, political and cultural relationships as well as friendship with Count Camillo Benso of Cavour and other famous figures from the period, including Giovenale Vegezzi Ruscalla, Costantino Nigra and Alfonso Lamarmora. These relationships were consolidated during his various diplomatic missions while foreign minister of Romania in the capital of the Kingdom of Italy at the time. For this reason, in addition to the street named in his honour, in October 2022, a commemorative plaque was placed in the city centre, between via San Francesco da Paola 4 and via Po, i.e. in the place of the ancient Hotel Trombetta, which had hosted the Romanian Statesman while he was in Turin.

A similar type of street naming is *via Sergiu Celibidache*, located in Navile, on the outskirts of the city of Bologna, and celebrates the famous conductor and composer of Romanian origins. While this street name seems to follow a thematic rationale since it is placed in an odonymic context commemorating musicians that also includes *via Frank Zappa* and *via Maria Callas*, it also reveals a clear endogenous nature. It honours an important figure that in the first half of the 1900s breathed life into the symphonic life of Bologna as the music director at the Teatro Comunale of Bologna for 20 years, from 1953 to 1973; he played a crucial role in the growth of its prestige. (see Girati, Verdi 2004).

Another Romanian figure who appears in the Italian odonymic tradition is the Romanian patriot and historian Nicolae Bălcescu. A street in the quarter Noce di Palermo was named after him. He died in this city of tuberculosis in 1852, and his death is also commemorated by a plaque placed in Via Butera 24 on the façade of

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<sup>23</sup> Only internationally famed figures, like John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, appear in the Italian street directories despite not having direct ties to the place involved (see Caffarelli 1998).

Palazzo Trinacria. In this case as well, *via Nicola Balcescu* was not only meant to honour a famous figure in Romanian history who was closely tied to the European Risorgimento movement and in particular to the Giovine Italia of Giuseppe Mazzini, but also to remember his relationship with the Sicilian city. In 1847 he stayed here for the first time and later in 1852 trusting, even if in vain, that the mild climate would heal him from a serious lung disease he was suffering from. It is interesting to remember that in the urban landscape of Palermo the figure of Bălcescu is also remembered by a bust symbolically placed in 1961 inside the garden dedicated to Garibaldi, along with other statues and memorial stones dedicated to Italian patriots of the Risorgimento<sup>24</sup>.

The name *Giardino Elena di Romania* in Florence departs from the common street naming tradition, for the quality of the referent as well as the unusual honour paid to a woman. This name is meant to commemorate the figure of this woman, first Regent and then the Queen Mother of Romania, a lover of the Florentine gardens and hills. In this case too, in fact, the homage is dedicated to a figure profoundly tied to the city of Florence, where she lived in exile between 1932 and 1940 and between 1948 and 1981. She stands out for her sensitivity shown in helping the population during the catastrophic flood in 1966 and for having contributed to the foundation of the Giardino dell'Iris, located close to the one dedicated to her<sup>25</sup>. This dedication also subscribes to the principle, recently supported by various administrations, of giving greater representation to female members of society in urban toponymy, traditionally oriented toward male figures<sup>26</sup>. Remaining in the city of Florence, we can also indicate, in regard to references to Romania present in the urban landscape, the commemorative plaque dedicated to Prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza, who played an important role in the process of the unification of Romania and was a supporter of the Italian national cause<sup>27</sup>.

Closing this review are two street names which commemorate generic groups rather than a single figure: *via Martiri di Romania* in the industrial area of Borzano, a fraction of Albinea (RE), that memorializes the victims of religious persecution during the communist regime, and *ponte Caduti di Timisoara* in Moncalieri (TO), a

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<sup>24</sup> Nicolae Bălcescu is also commemorated with a monument built in his memory in 1935 near the cemetery of Rotoli in Palermo.

<sup>25</sup> Elena of Romania is remembered for having saved thousands of Jews during the Nazi persecution, earning her the title "Righteous among the Nations", awarded by the State of Israel.

<sup>26</sup> As Caffarelli revealed (Caffarelli 1998: 636) in the Italian street name index there are 874 female names and only 19 of these, 12 of whom are saints, exceed more than 100 occurrences.

<sup>27</sup> The memory stone is placed between viale Machiavelli and the square of Porta Romana, below the villa he lived in beginning with 1870.

bridge over the Po connecting the two sides of the Piedmontese city separated by the Po, whose name intends to pay homage to a tragic event in recent Romanian history.

At the end of this excursus we can observe that linguistically speaking, having to respond to criteria regarding clarity, legibility and simplicity primarily dictated by the identification function of the street name, the toponyms present in the names of the streets are indicated using, if existent, the corresponding Italian exonym (*Bucarest* for *București*)<sup>28</sup>; however, in other cases as in the translation of anthroponyms, graphic and phonetic adaptations are made to suit Italian (in particular in the namings examined *ă* becomes *a* and *ș* becomes *s*). Diachronically speaking, regarding the five phases of Italian street naming identified by Raffaelli<sup>29</sup>, the names related to Romania are found in the last phase, or rather the Italian Republic (from 1945 until today) and reflect, at least in part, new orientations that have become popular beginning with the second half of the past century, when an increase in building development made it necessary to find new names for the new public spaces of circulation. In particular, the attention of administrators to famous figures from Romanian history and culture respects the principle of promoting local elements, choosing to commemorate figures who were born or had lived in the city, thus maintaining at least a partially endogenous spirit (see Caffarelli 2005:23). Although some, like Vasile Alecsandri and Nicolae Bălcescu, may be among more recent namings and refer to peripheral streets, they are grouped in the oldest and recurring commemorative tradition. In fact, honouring the heroic deeds of the Risorgimento constituted the earliest onomastic source for street names after the National Unification in the period 1861-1914 and pertained principally to the central and most popular areas for inhabitants (see. Raffaelli 2010: 435-436). As for geographic names, clearly symbolic street naming, brought about with twinning relationships and intended to strengthen and celebrate the cultural, economic and social exchange between the Italian and Romanian communities, represents a significant change in the Italian street naming panorama. If in fact “the decision to give a street a particular name, precisely because it is an official act, carries its own weight and symbolic significance” (Serianni 1995: 41), a street naming policy of this type, oriented to enhancing multiculturalism, represents an important sign of well-established integration and recognition of important components in Italian society, like the Romanian communities that live in Italy.

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<sup>28</sup>A list of Italian exonyms related to European toponyms can be consulted on the page [https://www.igmi.org/++theme++igm/toponomastica/6\\_Principali%20esonimi%20italiani.pdf](https://www.igmi.org/++theme++igm/toponomastica/6_Principali%20esonimi%20italiani.pdf)

<sup>29</sup>Specifically, the Risogimentale phase, the First World War, Fascism, “the Two Italies” (The Kingdom of the South liberated by the allies and the Italian Social Republic), and the Democratic Republic of Italy. (Raffaelli 2010).

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