

CULTURAL STEREOTYPES OUTLINING THE ROMANIANS' IMAGE ABROAD

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ABSTRACT: *In the context of globalization, the initial impact of a foreign cultural environment is often shocking on account of the conflict between self-stereotypes (how we see ourselves) and hetero-stereotypes (how we see the others and how the others see us). Therefore, the paper relies on representations of the Romanians in foreign literature and media as concrete examples of stereotypical perceptions of diversity. Ultimately, the study points out that global integration is a matter of cultural awareness, which is a permanent reconciliation of pre-conceived 'images'.*

KEY-WORDS: *globalization, global integration, diversity, self-stereotypes, heterostereotypes, cultural awareness.*

JEL CLASSIFICATION: *Z13.*

1. CULTURAL STEREOTYPES AND THEIR ROLE IN DEALING WITH DIVERSITY

1.1. Definition and classification of stereotypes

Based on the etymology of the word (Gk. *stereos* - 'solid' + *typos* - 'character, type'), the stereotype is defined as "image perpetuated without change" or "preconceived and oversimplified notion of characteristics typical of a person or group"¹. The stereotype is the motor of virtually any human interaction, at least in its initial stage, since labelling and classification are part of our instinctive drive to order our experience so that we could make sense of it more easily. As a social and cultural adjustment mechanism, stereotyping operates both as an inward and outward projection of perceptions and expectations, hence its spitting into *self-stereotypes*,

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¹ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/stereotype>

which represent “how we believe ourselves to be”, and *heterosterotypes* “how we believe others to be”; “how others believe us to be” (David 2015, p.53).

Stereotypes are probably the most stable determining factors of cultural interaction. This means that they are historically inherited and so deeply rooted in the collective consciousness that they keep functioning as basic communication cues well after their validity has been challenged by new realities, which often reduce them to mere myths, supported by limited direct experience or the need to justify certain attitudes or actions. This is the reason why Professor David draws attention to the necessity of discerning between representative stereotypes and clichés, the latter being obsolete, isolate perceptions, no longer supported historically, socially or culturally (p. 54).

Finally, it is important to notice that stereotypes can have “positive or negative consequences on a group and an individual level” (David 2015, p. 54), depending on the attributes they set forth to make a first impression.

1.2. Self-stereotypes and heterosterotypes in the Romanians’ cultural profile

After ten years of surveys, interviews and rigorous data processing, Romanian psychologist Daniel David published his exquisite monograph on the psychological and cultural profile of the Romanian people (2015), in which he draws the following conclusions on our self-perception and the way in which other nations see us.

Thus, in terms of positive self-stereotypes, his research reveals that the Romanians consider themselves hospitable and friendly, tolerant, emotional, intelligent, and resilient. As to the negative features, they admit to be indifferent, cynical and sceptic, less civilized in comparison with other nations, as well as gregarious and unruly (David 2015, p. 311).

As far as our perception of the others is concerned, we consider the westerners “civilized”, the Americans - “pragmatic and cold”, the French - “bohemian and cold”, the Germans - “organized”, the English - “civil and cold”, the Russians - “inflexible and patriotic”, the Chinese - “hard-working”, the Japanese - “organized”, the Spanish - “impulsive”, the Italians - “easy-going, hard-working, and talkative”, and the Arabs - “religious and fanatic” (David 2015, p. 312). In terms of national preferences, the British and the Americans are at the head of the list, followed by the French, the Germans, the Hungarians and the Russians.

On the other hand, literature in the field quoted in Professor David’s work (Hunyady, 2003; Dâncu & Orban, 2015, Pew Research Center, 2012) show that the foreigners tend to see us less positively than we see them, than we see ourselves and then they see themselves. In this respect, David is of the opinion that foreign representations of the Romanians are generally based “on limited experiences and the need to justify the present” (p.314). In this sense, the Hungarians consider us patriotic, well adapted and oriented, but minimize all the other positive features in our self-perception, whereas the Italians consider us rather idle. Interestingly, the heterosterotypes regarding the Romanians are “closer to *how we are* than to *how we believe we are*” (David, 2015, p. 318), which indicates our instinctive tendency to

achieve idealized projections of ourselves as a means of defense and of coping with reality.

Apart from the above, our present perception by foreign cultures is predominated by such clichés as the association with Dracula and vampires, mostly in the US, and with antisocial, less conscientious behaviour in Western Europe.

Ultimately, the discrepancy between self-stereotypes and the heterostereotypes that determine the others' representations of the Romanians is the main source of the fundamental characteristic of the Romanians' psychological and cultural profile namely "the chronic uncertainty/insecurity throughout history" (David 2015, p. 319)

2. HOW THE OTHERS SEE US PERCEPTIONS OF ROMANIA AND THE ROMANIANS ABROAD

Starting from the premise that such a complex and sensitive issue as cultural representation can be most effectively dealt with at the intersection of multiple levels of perception, we have selected a variety of data sources, from surveys to the printed media and social networks in order to complete the image of our nation as it is projected from different, and sometimes even extreme, perspectives.

2.1. Romania's representation in the British press

In a March 20 2016 article entitled "Romania: Hellhole or Country of Romance and Mystery?", published in the online edition of *The Guardian*, , journalist Carole Cadwalladr proposes a balanced approach to Romania and the Romanians by emphasizing that the nation's deplorable image in the media and the negative perception by the British is largely based on ignorance, since "it turns out that not only do we know hardly anything about Romania, but what we do know isn't even true" (Cadwalladr, 2016).

In order to make her point, she quotes a survey conducted by the *Observer*, according to which "most Brits believe that Romanians come to Britain to steal our jobs and get their teeth fixed on the NHS" (Cadwalladr, 2016), whereas 25% of the respondents believe that the Romanians are aggressive and lazy, and consider Romania as the worst place to live of all the countries in Europe, in spite of the fact that fewer than 1% British citizens have ever visited the country. In the same context, 58% of the respondents believe that Romania has sent the most migrants to the UK, when, in reality, at the time when the article was published, fewer than 100,000 Romanians were reported to reside on British territory, in comparison with 700,000 Poles. The author admits that the context for this negative perception was created by alarmist newspaper headlines and a prime-time Channel 4 series entitled *The Romanians Are Coming* that broadcast shocking footage of "this very poor man who had nine kids and didn't speak English who came to try and find work in Britain" (Cadwalladr, 2016) and failed to mention, for instance, the Romanians pursuing successful careers in London.

Another instance of limited cultural knowledge that fosters rejection and intolerance is the confusion, fairly common with the western countries, between the

Romanians and the Roma people, partly because of the name resemblance, and partly because Romania is the country of the largest population of gypsies in Europe.

In the spirit of a balanced journalistic approach, the article also displays Cadwalladr's positive impressions when she returns to Bucharest 20 years after her first visit in 1991, when "of all the post-Soviet hellholes I visited during that period, the country seemed stuck in a different category of bleakness. I've never been anywhere where people just looked so beaten down and depressed" (Cadwalladr, 2016). Her new visit, during which she talks with Romanian and foreign residents, offers a reassuring perspective on the capital city, which everybody perceives as changed for the better, with a dynamic cultural life and numerous attractions. However, the most obvious change is that of the Romanian mentality across two generations. Speaking about the Romanians born in the 1990s, Philip Ó Ceallaigh, an Irish writer living in Bucharest, notices: "They are healthy. They really are no different from young people in western Europe whereas their parents are a different species. They were totally traumatized and still are to a degree" (Cadwalladr, 2016).

Despite the visible progress of the country, the fascination exerted by stereotypes and myths is still irresistible, pushing most tourists "straight to Transylvania, home to Dracula", and the properties of Prince Charles, himself irreversibly charmed by the pristine landscapes and medieval atmosphere of the Transylvanian countryside. As a matter of fact, British naturalist John Akeroyd confirms that "it's the last place in Europe that has the same extensive landscape that existed in the 18th century or even medieval times" (Cadwalladr, 2016).

As Michael Bird, an English journalist based in Bucharest states, it is precisely this mixture of wilderness and modernity, of myth and reality, that elicits divergent responses our country: "Romania tends to inspire two extreme reactions in the British press. Either it's a hellhole for the right-wing press. Or it has this mysterious romanticism. It's where the middle ages meet totalitarianism. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* meets *Game of Thrones*" (Cadwalladr 2016)

In the context, *The Telegraph* lists a series of 'fascinating facts' about Romania, such as:

- **Bucharest's Palace of the Parliament**, acknowledged by Guinness World Records as the world's heaviest building (86 meters high, with a surface of 365,000 square meters, second only to The Pentagon);
- **The Transfăgărășan highway**, declared world's best driving road by English journalist and motoring specialist Jeremy Clarkson;
- **The bison**, Europe's largest mammal, extinct in other countries, and Europe's largest population of **brown bears**;
- Provided the **shooting sites for** scenes in successful Hollywood productions such as *Borat*, *Cold Mountain*, and *Anaconda III*;
- **Cărturești Bookshop** in Bucharest, located in a restored 19th century building, is one of the world's most beautiful bookshops;
- Romania has **the fourth best 4G network** in the world;
- The Romanian **rail network is the 15th most extensive** in the world even though the country is only the world's 81st largest in terms of total area;
- Bucharest has an **Arch of Triumph** similar to the Parisian monument;

- **The giant sculpture** (55m/25m) depicting the head of Decebalus, the last king of Dacia, who fought against the Roman Empire, made on the rocky bank of the Danube, in the Iron Gates gorge;
- Romania is **the birthplace of Francesco Illy**, the founder of the Italian coffee roasting company;
- Some of **the world's greatest inventors** were Romanian: Nicolae Paulescu discovered insulin, although two Canadian scientists were awarded the Nobel Prize in 1923 for their studies, Henri Coandă invented the modern jet engine, and Petrache Poenaru created the fountain pen;
- The country has **four Nobel prize laureates**: George Emil Palade (medicine), Elie Wiesel (peace), Herta Müller (literature) and Stefan Hell (chemistry).
- Romania has **seven Unesco World Heritage Sites**, including the eight churches of northern Moldavia, and the wooden churches of Maramureş, of which one (Săpânța Peri), which claims to be the tallest wooden church in the world (78 m);
- **The Merry Cemetery in Săpânța** is unique through its colourful tombstones and amusing epitaphs (*The Telegraph*, 2016).

2.2. Romania's perception and self-perception on social networks

Since over the past decade social networks have developed tremendously as platforms of idea and experience exchanges, a thorough study of the perception of Romania and the Romanians cannot ignore the importance of this type of discourse. Moreover, the information provided voluntarily and spontaneously by individuals from different cultures are susceptible of yielding more genuine responses than in the case of the journalistic discourse or even the formal sociological survey.

Thus, in 2017, the *Quora* online forum invites its subscribers to share their perception of Romania and the Romanian culture by answering the question "What are the good and bad things of Romania?". In order to draw coherent conclusions, the paper groups the respondents into:

- foreigners who are currently Romanian residents for different reasons (migration, business, etc);
- foreigners with different spans of experience in Romania;
- Romanians who currently live abroad;
- Romanians who currently live in Romania.

W.D., a British-Irish emigrant to Romania displays a very positive and optimistic attitude towards his adoptive country by pointing out the following *good things* that can be summarized as: rapidly advancing economy; natural beauty; kind people who make immigrants feel welcome; fast internet; low cost of living; and low crime.

Among the *bad things*, he lists low wages, still existing corruption, and too much bureaucracy.

At the same time, based on one year personal experience in Romania, he shatters such myths as the stray dogs in Bucharest, people selling things at the sides of roads, and stolen phones. Given all this, he considers that "things [...] have been

cleaned up” and, although certain things are ‘unpolished’, he concludes that “it is a beautiful country and personally I love living here” (Quora 2017).

Another foreign resident, S.Z., who runs a business in Romania, recommends the country as “a great environment to start a business in’ in terms of costs and taxes. Moreover, he is delighted with the ‘amazing nature’ and the rural culture, both very well preserved in comparison with other European countries.

At the same time, based on his business experience, he perceives the Romanians as still subdued by a communist mindset, being reluctant to work, and feeling “very entitled and jealous”. However, the most insightful point he makes about the Romanian mentality is what he defines as “a false sense of belonging in people”, by virtue of which the Romanians living abroad tend to denigrate their home country. Another very interesting observation is the eagerness of the youth to leave the country, instead of trying to make a contribution to change.

An anonymous respondent who signs as ‘an EU citizen living in Bucharest’ also points out the nice and friendly character of the Romanians, as well as the breathtaking wild landscapes as definitely strong points, in parallel with such drawbacks as the chaotic driving and parking in Bucharest, and the authorities’ failure to enforce the law, which generates a ‘lack of basic social manners’ on the part of the population.

From the category of foreigners who have had occasional contacts with our country and culture, M.E., who doesn’t mention the extent of his personal experience in Romania, considers that there is *no positive aspect of Romania*, and draws up a long list of flaws, such as: corrupted state and government official; sad, depressed people; absurd taxes; filled with gypsies, trash pickers, shop lifters, pick-pockets, and smugglers who sell cigarettes, fake perfumes, fake or stolen phones, etc.; filled with homeless people and stray dogs (packs of dogs attacking people); low wages and high prices; lack of parking spaces; bribery everywhere, from the IRS to hospital care; the precarious health system.

In his opinion, *the only positive thing* in Romania is the internet speed, much superior to that from the USA and the UK. Although the vehemence of this discourse is likely to be justified by a very negative personal experience, by comparing this description with the previous one we can infer that this particular experience is fairly old and limited time-wise.

On the other hand, J.L., who mentions to have visited Romania quite often on account of being engaged to a Romanian, spots the following problems of the Romanian society: the older generation are still in a communist mindset; corrupt politicians; large surfaces of unused farmland; the exaggerate number of betting shops, banks and pharmacies.

However, he regards all this in a detached way, considering that the good compensates for the bad: “Other than that it’s a very beautiful country with wonderful people and good values” (Quora 2017).

The third category of respondents consists of Romanians who no longer live in Romania. Of these, E.B. is aware that his response might be biased given his detachment from the daily challenges of the Romanian society. Still, he outlines a very realistic image of the Romanians, which combines natural talent, an incredible sense of

humor and of the absurd with a fair amount of historically justifiable neurosis, cynicism, and negativity.

Another Romanian expatriate, M.S., begins by expressing his pride to be Romanian and lists the landscapes, alongside with its history, culture, food, and people, as positive aspects, counterbalanced by corruption and disinterest in preserving and capitalizing on our heritage of the country. In this sense, he is confident that Romania's resources and people can secure the country a place among the economically efficient and powerful countries in the East, provided that things are 'done right'.

Finally, B.A., who identifies himself as 'a Romanian living in London since 2008' chooses to confine his response to a list of social, political and economic drawbacks, namely: meritocracy functions very poorly, being undermined by nepotism and cronyism; the widely accepted defrauding of the state through the gray economy; widely accepted piracy of intellectual property; a distorted system of values according to which "people look up to those that made money by any means, even illegally", which creates dangerous role models for the young generation; the massive migration of intellectuals (doctors, engineers) to other countries, after getting an education in Romania, which is very inefficient for the national economy; Romania's colonization by the EU great powers, who impose the trade rules destroying local businesses.

From the last category of respondents, namely the Romanians who still live in the country, M.L. considers that the main *good things* of Romania are: the best and the cheapest internet in the world; the variety of natural features; the homogeneity of the country from an ethnic, cultural and religious point of view and, implicitly, the relative absence of such conflicts; the temperate climate; attractive social and economic taxes. Among the most disturbing *bad things* he mentions the still very precarious infrastructure; the big development discrepancies between rural and urban areas, which can become a plus for people in search of an archaic way of life in the countryside; still high level of corruption with politicians and officials.

A Romanian student, R.P., also acknowledges corruption, considering it the main problem of our society and the source of many other issues. To make his point he provides examples from the healthcare system where bribery still functions as a way of getting medical assistance. He also brings to discussion the education system, with overloaded curricula and the parallel system of private tutoring. As a consequence, most of the population is poorly educated, whereas the educated people choose to migrate to other countries for higher wages and standards of living. Other problems are related with the poor infrastructure and a high level of crime induced by poverty, mostly in the countryside. A very interesting detail, though, is that he rejects the image of the nice Romanians as a cliché, arguing that such perception can be validated only by more extended personal experience in the country.

O.T., a doctor still working in the Romanian healthcare system, starts by confessing that he is planning to "leave this country and never come back". In his opinion, the best things about Romania are the variety of natural assets and historic places; creative young people; and cheap living compared to western Europe. On the other hand, prices are generally high and not matched by product quality; people's low financial, medical or legal education upon high school graduation, which affects their later personal and social evolution; and people's bad system of values and their

tendency to break laws even when they know them. Moreover, from the position of an insider, he depicts the bleak image of Romanian state hospitals, with their precarious hygiene, lack of resources, and the majority of doctors and nurses who “expect money in their pockets from every patient they see” (Quora, 2017).

3. CONCLUSIONS

In an attempt to detect the way in which the Romanians’ image emerges at the intersection of self-perception and the perceptions of our nation from the outside, we have consulted the most influential contemporary sources of information, namely the media and social networks, from which we have inferred the following:

- stereotypical perceptions and expectations are equally supported by self-projections and projections from the outside;
- the media generally tend to inflate stereotypes and cliches for the sake of the sensational, with a determining impact on the public opinion, which subsequently generates responses meant to accommodate the newly formed trend of thought;
- given the variety of respondents and the spontaneity of the discourse, social networks are likely to provide more genuine responses, closer to reality;
- of the four categories of respondents to the Quora survey, the least objective are the foreigners who had a limited experience of the Romanian culture and people;
- foreigners currently residing in Romania or those with a more extended experience of the country display more balanced perceptions, in spite of their overenthusiasm about the country’s natural beauty;
- paradoxically, the least biased are the Romanians living in or outside the country, whose perceptions are not distorted either by the daily challenges of the Romanian society (in the case of the former) or nostalgia (in the case of the latter).

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