

# THE KALEIDOSCOPE OF THE IMAGE OF EUROPE IN THE ROMANIAN COLLECTIVE MIND

**Dorin-Mircea Dobra\***

**dorin.dobra@ubbcluj.ro**

**Abstract:** The process of "Europeanization of Romania" is, in fact, the process of its modernization, because we have been European since the beginning of our history. We consider three moments to be defining in this sense: Romanization from the beginning of our era, contact with revolutionary ideas from the middle of the 19th century and the contemporary period. From the beginning until today, Europe as a model of civilization has benefited from a multitude of images in the Romanian collective mind. A few, positive and negative, we try to decipher on this occasion.

**Keywords:** history, collective imaginary, Europe, modernization, Europeanness.

## Argument

At a quick evaluation of the three moments that shaped both the history and the being of the Romanian people - the Romanian colonization, the creation of the unitary national state and the transition to capitalism - we can easily state that reporting to the Western-European model meant reporting from the bottom up, from the perspective of the level of organization or modernization at which the two entities were. For this reason, Europe or the West acquired an idealized image in the Romanian collective mind, of an objective or "spiritual pole" towards which we must aim, of a civilization next to which we must sit. "It expresses original values, creations and ideological tendencies; a new culture and literature; new and advanced political-social institutions; achieving a high level of progress, culture and civilization."<sup>1</sup>

This is, perhaps, the reason why Romania manages over the course of a year, as we will see, to offer the most consistent model of Europeanness, in three extraordinary poses, making us affirm at the time that we have "3 reasons why we can be proud of Romania", from the perspective of the pro-European and the self-declared Europeanist at every opportunity. We dedicate a substantial part of our present paper to this pro-European attitude.

We dedicate another segment to "Romanian psychoses regarding Europe", seeking to refer, of course, to those beliefs (held sometimes with

---

\* Lecturer PhD., Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of European Studies, Cluj-Napoca.

<sup>1</sup> A. Marino, *Discovery of Europe*, Aius Print Publishing House, Craiova, 2006.

interest) that place the European Union and the West in a disadvantageous, gloomy and even negative light. Recorded on various social, professional, cultural levels, identifiable as well, they constitute a certain chorus in the public space, made up of voices of proper names with positions that are often explainable, although often anachronistic. Democracy, however, would not be as rich and attractive without this critical, negationist and often vitriolic choir, especially since it is one of the values on which the European Union itself is constituted.<sup>2</sup>

The conclusions of this paper, which we assume from the perspective of the didactician and researcher of the European studies area, will try to offer an up-to-date picture of the "Idea of Europe" in the whole set of beliefs, myths, convictions, assumptions and even "Romanian psychoses".

Soulfully close to Europe, organically placed at the twinning of Europe with the East, living peripheral neurotics of this continent, we remain European in ideals and even in the way of being, especially from an external perspective.

## **Planting seeds in the soil of modernization – Europeanization**

We probably weren't ready, but who would be? Who would have had the necessary authority in those moments? Perhaps the political "emanated" leaders? They were too concerned with maintaining power. Perhaps the intellectual elite? It did not break through in the demagoguery, populisms, manipulations and disorder of that time. Maybe the representatives of the historical parties? A "miners' revolt" was created for them...

It is certain that the ideals and idealizations of freedom quickly turned into cruel daily realities. Such a complex, difficult, extensive process quickly showed its fangs. "With noise and joy, with laughter and with tears, under the television projectors of the whole world, the peoples of the East sincerely believed that by giving up the communist activists they would enter directly into the society of abundance. They didn't know they were getting into self-robbing."<sup>3</sup>

In the Romanian collective mind, moreover, the first culprits of the post-December evolution are the Romanians themselves, first in the case of the disappearance of the former collective agricultural enterprises, later due to corruption and the inability to keep the former industrial

---

<sup>2</sup> See art. 2 of the Treaty on the European Union. Available at: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0001.02/DOC\\_1&format=PDF](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0001.02/DOC_1&format=PDF);

<sup>3</sup> Claude Karnoouk, *Communist / Post-communism and late modernity*, Polirom Publishing House, Iasi, 2000.

enterprises alive). The "self-robbing" to which the author refers was *realized* in reality, a reality that may even find consistent explanations for the entire transition process. Samuel Huntington makes assessments that may seem brave: "Modernization also contributes to corruption by creating new sources of wealth and power. Its connection with politics is not defined by the traditional dominant norms of society, and modern norms are not yet accepted by the dominant groups in society."<sup>4</sup> The transition, therefore, is precisely what creates such conjunctures, in which corruption can even have unsuspected effects: "Like politics or clientelistic politics in general, corruption provides concrete, immediate and specific benefits to groups that might otherwise be on completely removed from society."<sup>5</sup>

At an evaluative glance, today we could easily come to the conclusion that there is no mistake that we could have made and missed. And it is not by chance that I referred to the dimensions of the total transition process, from the economic to the cultural, from the political to the institutional, from mentalities to property. Of all, however, that of mentalities seems to us the most important and the most relevant. Especially from the perspective of the present paper.

Summing up the almost fifty years of communism with the more than thirty years of transition, we easily realize the total, and at the same time sudden, historical shifts that the Romanian collective mind has gone through. However, we also find countless positive sides, although the daily reality may suggest otherwise. And the image of Europe benefits from this reality, complex, dichotomous, but encouraging from several perspectives.

We will deal, however, first with the negative, tendentious, mostly unfounded ones.

### **Three Romanian psychoses regarding Europe**

We find the process (phenomenon) of defaming Europe to be one, if not natural, at least automatic. In a democratic society, where the sources of information and, automatically, of manipulation multiply exponentially, where people are free to choose the channels of information and, most of the time, fall prey to their specific argumentation, ultra-critical attitudes, negative and even destructive will be present in the public space.

The debate, as long as it still exists in Romania, is neither consistent nor consistent. Everything happens instantaneously, most arguments perish in the face of accusations, defamation and vituperative insults – features that are not so present in the media or in European social media.

---

<sup>4</sup> S.P. Huntington, *The political order of changing societies*, Polirom Publishing House, Iasi, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem.

Somehow, however, everything is explainable in this case as well. "It is clear that the peoples of Eastern Europe are tired of the political-ideological debates, with which they have been fed for years and years to adhere, under the empire of necessity, to other substitutes. Practically, today almost no one in the East believes in other individual values apart from family solidarity, nor in other public values than goods and profit." <sup>6</sup> It reached this stage precisely because, as I announced, the transition was neither prepared nor assumed through solid knowledge about what it entails, or through economic strategies to shorten and make it more efficient. "In the early 1990s, the majority accepted that 'reform' was necessary. Later, it was found to be painful on an individual level. Gradually, each wanted someone else to feel its pain."<sup>7</sup>

In such an atmosphere, Europe often fell victim to Romanian expectations and failures. One of the first accusations against it can be formulated in the phrase: *We were forced to sell "the pearls of the Romanian economy in order to be welcomed into the club"*, with direct reference to the privatizations of the early 2000s.

A whole series of state-owned enterprises, most of them strategic in the economy (banks<sup>8</sup>, energy supply companies, communications) were the subject of property transfers from the state to foreign private companies, with the aim of achieving the objective of "functional economy" and competitive in - a perspective of European accession. "Accession to the European Union can be viewed from the perspective of this optimistic logic, since the EU would provide, arguably, extraordinary support for the transformation of the system."<sup>9</sup> A process that was soon put at the expense of the interests of the European capital, that is, of the EU officials as representatives of this capital of voices sometimes with experience in the field. "They're not the only 'experts' who want to push the idea into our heads that the European Union ministers (commissioners) who "asked us to privatize" are to blame for the shortcomings that fell on citizens as a result of the post-December "privatizations".<sup>10</sup>

We put the whole psychosis of "selling out to foreigners" and to "interested Europeans" to an older communist concept known as "the country in danger". "At the level of political culture, we can observe the use of homogenizing and even panicked discourse, such as "The homeland is

---

<sup>6</sup> C. Karnouh, *op.cit.*

<sup>7</sup> Gh. Mihai Bârlea, *Mentalities in transition*, Limes Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Magazine 22, Privatization of BCR: should we cry, should we rejoice?. Available at: <https://revista22.ro/opinii/ilie-serbanescu/privatizarea-bcr-sa-plangem-sa-ne-bucuram>.

<sup>9</sup> D. Daianu, in the volume *Ethical frontiers of capitalism*, coord. D. Daianu and R. Vrânceanu, Polirom Publishing House, Iasi, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> C. Cojocaru, *The crime called privatization*, Bucharest, 2008.

in danger!", which seems to me to be a symbolic invariant that can be found both in Nicolae Ceaușescu and in the last period of Ion Iliescu. As well as the manipulation of the myth of national independence - see the memoirs and interviews of various former dignitaries, including Niculescu-Mizil.<sup>11</sup>

The second identifiable psychosis of the European Union is that of *admitting our country for the mercantile purpose of treating us as useful consumers, using us for labor and depriving us of our own cheaply available resources*. Closely related to the other distorted images (otherwise the public imaginary creates manipulative models in italics), the psychosis mentioned above can very well be the subject of a separate analysis on the three mentioned segments. One by one, the image of simple consumers created another one of "low quality food" sold in Romania, that of overqualified workers used as brute force created the complex of inferior and unacceptable working conditions, and lastly, that of the deprivation of one's own resources created platforms and political actions, national policies to limit the use of these resources. We see in this psychosis a reactivation of the Romanian mythology regarding the injustice of myoritic destiny, an inadequacy to the "intimate-foreign" reality and the failure to assume "humility". "On the one hand, humility knows that what is superior cannot humble. That is why it does not come into conflict either with that which causally precedes our freedom, or with that which is endowed with an increased degree of freedom."<sup>12</sup> A kind of awareness of reality - not assumed, however, in the myoritic variant, nor accepted as an obvious reality.

At the end of the section dedicated to Romanian psychoses (complexes) in relation to Europe, we highlight perhaps the most dangerous of them: we are treated as second-rate European citizens, we are seen as second-rate Europeans. Closely related to the previous vision, of consumers – workers, this perspective even created a political slogan in the campaign for the European Parliament elections in 2019. Starting from obvious inferiority complexes, cultivated - not necessarily consistent, the image of discriminated European citizens produced the well-known phrase, "Proud to be Romanian". Used politically, so with the intention of attracting the votes of those who felt dissatisfaction with the EU (as we will explain the context in the next part), the campaign and the slogan "Proud to be Romanian", of the party in charge of the country at that time, even caused damage to the respective political formation, as evidenced by the result obtained and, subsequently, the loss of the government majority.

---

<sup>11</sup> Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Specters of Central Europe*, Polirom Publishing House, Iasi, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Gabriel Liiceanu, *About the Limit*, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 1994.

Of course, the mentioned slogan, as an arrogant reaction to the psychosis of "Romanians - second-rate Europeans", had deeper conjunctural substrates, including illiberal and anti-European tendencies that proved to be penalized by the Romanian electorate. We also attribute this self-minimizing and manipulative vision to an older one, based on the historical conviction of the non-recognition of the qualities of the Romanian people by Westerners, a kind of self-marginalization stemming from dissatisfaction. "Unsatisfied, that's how we feel deep down. Dissatisfied, however, not exactly like a Cantemir, who came with the whole West in him to lean on the Romanian nation. Unsatisfied with what we know we could be."<sup>13</sup>

### **Three signs of our Europeanness**

Maybe not many people saw them as such, certainly fewer people made the connection between the moments and phenomena of August 10, 2018, October 6-7, 2018 and May 26, 2019, each of them transmitting consistent pro-European signals and messages. We are talking about a pro-European atmosphere, which never left the fiber and mentality of the Romanian soul, even if sometimes the body of critics and dissenters seemed predominant.

One by one, evaluating the three moments we mentioned, we call them "the example of adherence to Europeanism" precisely from the perspective of their meanings. August 10, 2018 marks a period in which Romanians started and consolidated the defense of justice, as a European symbol and value, through street demonstrations. For this reason, we consider the moment of August 10 as perhaps the only European example of a popular demonstration (100,000 participants) in support of the rule of law. Rendered as such in the international press<sup>14</sup>, the demonstration created empathy both as a reaction to the violent intervention of the law enforcement forces, and through the image that remained emblematic representing the EU flag illuminated with telephone terminals. We therefore emphasize the adherence of Romanians to one of the fundamental values of the EU, Justice, as well as to the European principle of the "rule of law".

The second highlighted moment refers to the "Referendum for the family" of October 6-7, 2018, proposed at the initiative of an NGO and managed to bring the necessary signatures only through the official

---

<sup>13</sup> Constantin Noica, *Pages on the Romanian Soul*, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2000.

<sup>14</sup> *Diaspora riot, 100,000 participants and serious violent incidents*, Deutsche Welle, 11.08.2018. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/ro/mitingul-diasporei-100000-de-protestatari-%C8%99i-incidente-violente-serioase/a-45041717>.

involvement of the Romanian Orthodox Church. Aiming to amend the Romanian Constitution, more precisely to Article 48 regarding marriage, by introducing the phrase "between a man and a woman", instead of the old phrase "between spouses". Obviously, the amendment aimed to eliminate the possibility of same-sex marriages. Taken over in a populist and politicized manner by the government arch, the referendum marked the electoral moment with the lowest voter turnout in Romania's post-communist period. By not participating, the Romanians showed non-intrusion into the private lives of others, in the light of the European value of human dignity, the principles of non-discrimination and the rights of persons belonging to minorities. A consistent signal of Europeanism, in our opinion.

Finally, the most emblematic message of pro-Europeanism: the result of the European Parliament elections in May 2019. We recall the atmosphere created by the government arch, the reaction of Romanian society to the attempt to undermine the power of justice or the attempt to manipulate the issue of marriage for the purpose political. To these, the campaign with Eurosceptic and illiberal tendencies and suggestions undertaken by these parties under the slogan "Proud to be Romanian" is added. In context, the messages of the two parties in power were towards less involvement of Europe in our internal affairs, under the manipulation that "obviously, the Union has no way of knowing all our problems". The argumentation was not far from the one used by Viktor Orban in Hungary, the eyes of the governors being increasingly focused on Romania's western border.

The Romanians' reaction and attitude towards these trends was eloquently expressed in the results of the voting for the European Parliament, through a new premiere, the main ruling party being a few tenths of a percent away from placing third for the first time in the results, and their partners of government without entering the European Parliament. We evaluate the reaction of the Romanians on May 26, 2019 as the penalty applied to those who could claim that "less Europe would not be so bad." Additionally, we point out the fact that on the same occasion a referendum for justice initiated by the President of Romania obtained the necessary majority, unlike the one before.

Three moments of which, therefore, we can always be proud. Overcoming all the inherent failures and route difficulties, the adherence of the Romanians to Europe proved unshakable - this time with clear evidence!

### **Our Europeanness!**

In the social tumult of the last Romanian century, which began with the interwar period, the mythologized Romanian interwar period, and

ended with our days, the Romanian collective mind went through countless transformations. Forced by history, we put this mentality in the situation of the "Romanian paradox" of Sorin Alexandrescu, that of being able to adapt, assume, at least to bend before the numerous influences, cultures, regimes. Hence a frenzy of change, a continuous trepidation towards something else, a continuous process of change. "The design of what is successive in the plane of simultaneity seems to me the path of a dangerous and sublime passion at the same time: to gain a head start on others, to quickly do everything that others have done leisurely, but also of a valuation of time that is completely different from that which operates in other cultures."<sup>15</sup>

In all this tumult, however, a guiding line remained impregnated since 1848, in the margins of which all ramblings had only the meaning of wandering. The line, the trajectory, proved to be that of our Europeanness. "...with all its theoretical and imitative character, the Constitution of June 9, 1848 remains the true starting point for a new orientation of our people; it represents the symbolic gesture by which the axis of our political and cultural life changed from East to West; the future revolutionary formation of Romanian civilization is linked to it - moreover, sociologically, the only one possible."<sup>16</sup>

Assimilation, synchronism, adaptation, osmosis even, the Europeanness of Romanians remains a historical example with each stage of evolution. Things had actually happened before the Revolution of 1848. "If one can cite anywhere in South-Eastern Europe a truly total and profound assimilation of this aspect of the spirit of the Enlightenment, one would hardly find a better conclusive example than the Romanian one."<sup>17</sup>

However, in order to pay due attention to the negative postures towards Europe in the Romanian mind, especially since history has shown us that such postures can, at a certain moment, take the foreground of the public debate, we will remember that most of the theories that analyze modernization, wherever it happens, talk about the existence of differentiated levels in relation to it. Especially when, between the political-social ideals and the layers of deep society there are design distances. "The great rift is thus between the state and the culture, between the political and the cultural, between synchronization at all costs with

---

<sup>15</sup> Sorin Alexandrescu, *The Romanian Paradox*, Univers Publishing House, Bucharest, 1998.

<sup>16</sup> Eugen Lovinescu, *History of Modern Romanian Civilization*, Minerva Publishing House, Bucharest, 1997.

<sup>17</sup> Adrian Marino, *op. cit.*

Western values and the ballast of a past still loved and respected, between the flight forward and the flight into the past."<sup>18</sup>

We can say that the existence of layers of modernization is still a natural phenomenon, especially when the effort to leap forward is a consistent one, although we, the Romanians, would rather place ourselves in a parallel leap, on completely different coordinates in comparison with those existent more than 30 years ago. The existence of layers becomes for this reason even more objective. "In the same way, we could talk about a tendentious Europeanization, in those societies where modernization did not include all its components. (...) From my point of view, in this period of European institutional and constitutional construction, a series of dysfunctions appear derived from the gap between the abstract rationalism of the European institutions and the complex realities in each country of the European Union."<sup>19</sup>

Kaleidoscope, therefore, with asymmetrical, multiple images, with sequences of disparate sensations, experiences and impressions. This is our Europeanness, criticized or repudiated, but out of ignorance. We are Europeans, and that cannot be denied. Souls close to Europe, organically placed at the twinning of Europe with the East, living peripheral neurotics of this continent, we remain European in ideals and even in the way of being, especially from an external view.

## References

Alexandrescu, S., (1998), *The Romanian Paradox*, Bucharest, Univers Publishing House.

Bârlea, Mihai Gh., (2003), *Mentalities in transition*, Cluj-Napoca, Limes Publishing House.

Cojocaru, C., (2008), *The crime called privatization*, Bucharest.

Daianu D., in the volume (2006), *Ethical frontiers of capitalism*, coord. Daianu D. and Vrânceanu R., Iasi, Polirom Publishing House.

Deutsche Welle, *Diaspora riot, 100,000 participants and serious violent incidents*, 11.08.2018. Available at:  
<https://www.dw.com/ro/mitingul-diasporei-100000-de-protestatari-%C8%99i-incidente-violente-serioase/a-45041717>

Huntington, S.P., (1999), *The political order of changing societies*, Iasi, Polirom Publishing House.

Karnoouk, C., (2000), *Communist / Post-communism and late modernity*, Iasi, Polirom Publishing House.

<sup>18</sup> Sorin Alexandru, Ibidem, p. 36.

<sup>19</sup> C. Schifirneț, *Tendential Modernity*, Tritonic Publishing House, Bucharest, 2016, p. 94.

Liiceanu, G., (1994), *About the Limit*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House.

Lovinescu, E., (1997), *History of Modern Romanian Civilization*, Bucharest, Minerva Publishing House.

Magazine 22, *Privatization of BCR: should we cry, should we rejoice?*. Available at: <https://revista22.ro/opinii/ilie-serbanescu/privatizarea-bcr-sa-plangem-sa-ne-bucuram>.

Marino, A., (2006), *Discovery of Europe*, Craiova, Aius Print Publishing House.

Noica, C., (2000), *Pages on the Romanian Soul*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House.

Schifirnet, C., (2016), *Tendential Modernity*, Bucharest, Tritonic Publishing House, p. 94;

The Treaty on the European Union. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/RO/TXT/?uri=CELEX:02000R0102&format=PDF>;

Tismăneanu, V., (2001), *Specters of Central Europe*, Iasi, Polirom Publishing House.