MEDIA CONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY. STEREOTYPES AND NEGATIVE NARRATIVES

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Abstract. *Narrative and identity theories applied to media discourse support the interpretative analysis of the current study aiming to underline the idea that contemporary media create new modes of signification by using various identity narratives with a high degree of depreciatory connotation. Actual media discourse shows an obvious tendency towards inducing a complex of inferiority by comparing Romanian people to other EU states visibly seen as being more advanced in every aspect. Clearly marked self-discriminatory narratives, since the media practitioners are Romanian as well, are coded to render the idea that media consumers are able to identify numerous identity features as counterexamples in comparison to other nations.*

Keywords: *national identity, discursive strategies*

Introduction. Theoretical framework

In Romanian and foreign scholarship, the term "narrative" has been taken up in various ways. Discussions on the media narratives have become popular during the last years, almost all concerned with the tendency of the media to construct images of identity, influencing the sense of collective identity. The constructivist perspective is taken into account whenever various studies attempt at giving a pertinent answer to the complex question "How do media construct national identities in discourse?" In a study on the Austrian nation, using the discourse-historical analysis, researchers from the University of Vienna comment on "the discursive strategies and linguistic devices employed to construct sameness and uniqueness, and differences to other national collectives", speaking about "ego-, ethno and nation-centric view, mentalities of nations, nationalist attitudes and stereotypes articulated in discourses" (De Cillia, Reisigl *et alii*, 1999: 149-150).

Drawing on Andersen's concept of nations as mental constructs, as "imagined political communities" the authors assert the idea that national identities are "discursively produced, reproduced, transformed and destructed", and that media people play an important part in employing "figurative discourses" on identity (*ibidem*, 153). According to Hall and Martin's hypothesis on "the construction of difference/ distinctiveness and uniqueness" and to Stuart Hall's view on nations as symbolic communities constructed discursively, the authors cite Uri Ram's supposition about nationality being "a narrative, a story which people tell about themselves in order to lend meaning to their social world" (*ibidem*, 155). The authors underline the significant role of discourses in construction of the national identities, and enumerate four types of discursive macro-strategies (constructive, perpetuating, transformational and destructive) along with some linguistic means of realization, such as synecdoche (collective singular, and the generalizing synecdoche) (*ibidem*, 157-165).

Helen Fulton underlines the role of the narrative in structuring the way people interpret reality, television offering its audiences a modified reality "in the form of hyperbole and parody", media narratives being those cultural products discursively oriented with great

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ideological impact in inducing the idea of "sovereign consumers" (2005 a: 1-5). There is a tight connection between the economic interference and the struggle for a high audience, that is why the author talks about a persuasion of media narratives similar to that of the advertisements. In the vein of the poststructuralists Helen Fulton refers to the denotative and connotative levels of the media discourses, concluding that denotation has in the same time connotative marks because of the fact that the meaningful accounts of the real world are constructed. People are persuaded by media texts to change themselves for a better fit to the surrounding reality and to think of themselves "as singular, unified, individual, able to resist dominant or preferred meanings" (*ibidem*, 6).

The author talks about a kind of "overlap between the information and narrative models" (2005 b: 226), and points out the discursive practices characteristic to the so called "objective" hard news such as: the third-person narration with the narrative voice elided from the story, a lot of empirical data, the lack of aspects of modality, namely the absence of those phrases as indicators of opinion and evaluation, in contrast to the "soft" news with "its more engaged narration, informal register, foregrounding of individuals and their personal experiences" (*ibidem*, 232).

We may assert that all the narrative strategies typical of news discourse discussed by Helen Fulton contain the denigration register. The author enumerates the angle (referring to the narrative templates which closely resemble the plots in fictional works), the point of closure (the story summary), the individualisation (the real individuals are "characters constituted from the same kinds of discursive material as fictional characters"), the focalisation (referring to the the reporter's viewpoint on the events), and chronology (*ibidem*, 233).

Anne Dunn proposes a definition of television news primarily taking into account its narrative characteristic. Narrative and representation conventions of the television newscast influence the way the audiences see the real world "to convey authority and immediacy", so to speak TV news "gives shape to narratives of the real" (2005:140-141). Employing proper narrative techniques in order to deliver a "good story" is the guarantee of keeping audience attention on regular basis (*ibidem*, 142). Both the video and audio narrative structures in a television newscast are essential in the construction of the news story, along with the direct and dialogic mode of address of the newsreader that suggests a kind of "co-presence", of "consensus", encouraging the audience's complicity (2005:148).

We might link the media tendency to promote some negative traits of the Romanians' image to Fligstein's conclusion – "the most privileged socioeconomic groups are the most European" (2008: 145). Following previous theories on identity as a consequence of social interactions, and talking about the self-perception as European, N. Fligstein points out "the mixture of ideational and rational components" (*ibidem*), and we may add a natural finding: Romanians are not most likely to think of themselves as Europeans since media broadcast often enough a kind of an outsider image by comparison to other EU states.

Starting from a poststructuralist theoretical approach to subjectivity and identity, Chris Weedon asserts that "discursive fields are themselves made up of competing discourses that produce different subject positions and forms of identity", language being a component of life experience, because it "constitutes rather than reflects or expresses the meaning of experience and identity" (2004: 17).

Ioan Drăgan draws correlations between the process of identity construction and the mass consumption of media products in a postmodern society: "Identity becomes mutual for a certain category of consumers of media using the same products and

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emblems", identity is now "almost exclusively dictated by media and becomes more and more unstable and more fragile" (2007: 230-240).

Constantin Schifirneţ sees the Romanian identity as "an expression of the national character that mirrors a nation's personality", and talks about a depreciatory opinion on the Romanian identity emphasized towards caricature, caused by the supposed gap between the European and the Romanian way of life (2009: 474).

Romanian media discursive strategies on national identity. Negative traits in the image construction

The mentality attributed to the Romanians include depreciatory stereotypical faults that are supposed to be inner-national traits, depicting both a concrete sameness and a uniqueness in the sense of a blamable peculiarity. Media stereotypes are unquestioningly taken for granted in constructing the image of a homogeneous national group designated with the personal pronoun "we" which embeds the idea of the uniqueness through negative difference. Media narrative will speak about things which can happen "only in Romania", this toponymical adverbial qualification implying an ironical tone. It is a strategy of emphasizing national peculiarity in a negative sense. The collective singular "the Romanian" becomes a symptom of a negative inclusion, in a kind of incriminatory generalization. The strategy employed is the negative self-representation versus positive other-presentation with explicit referents namely other EU states, Romania being compared to elsewhere. Stories of audio and visual components, the newsreaders'mode of address, the live voice-over render a specific denigration tone.

In a package which is defined by specialists as "the most elaborated form of news story, and most highly developed as narrative form, a story introduced by a newsreader but then presented by a reporter, containing actuality or sound-bites" (Dunn, A., 2005: 149), one may notice the same mode of structuring the denigration account by comparison to others.

What we can call "the doubt technique" is one of the means used in the narrative structure of news. It points to the Romanians' inability to act appropriately, as opposed to foreigners' skills. The reporter's comment "We cannot help asking ourselves what would have happened, if the accident had happened in Romania" follows the eulogistic presentation of an event, which took place in some EU country, and which involved civic heroic acts (humanitarian aid), which shed light on the noble-mindedness of the human character (the regaining of a valuable lost object by its possessor as a result of the citizens' involvement), etc. What is more or less implied here is the idea that the Romanians could not have shared the same civic spirit showed by the foreigners in front of their fellow citizens. A programme on Kanal D, called "Asta-i România" ("That's Our Romania"), broadcasts feature stories, whose narrative supposes the same cliché mode, which begins with the presentation of a blamable act committed by a Romanian citizen, and which becomes, by means of generalization and stereotypy, the negative categorial representative of the nation. Moral shortcomings, testifying to low intelligence, faults in character, they all appear within the television narrative as character clues, which support the descriptive framework correlated with the narrative one. The image which is created for the majority of the Romanians who have become protagonists of the television show, is depreciatory. It is an individual portrait, which hints at the collective one. The reporter' comments more often than not include the ironic, slightly defeatist finding that this is how we, the Romanians, are. The use of this

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expression, reminiscent of ethopoiesis, directs the audience to a generalizing, stereotypical interpretation. The Romanian ethos is assigned, under such circumstances, less praiseworthy traits, such as exacerbated sloth resembling the Balkanic laziness, lack of involvement in the community's projects, carelessness, lack of culture, even of intelligence, neglect and non-professionalism, the avoidance of truth in order to take unfair advantage, the temptation of easy money made with little effort. By drawing a parallel with the good things that happen in other countries, especially in the EU member-states, the Romanians' failure to follow the foreigners' example is brought to the fore. Within the narrative frameworks of news bulletins, this failure reads as the impossibility to copy the methods of the others, to appropriately put them into practice, to capitalize on the foreigners' experience. In this case the television news makes use of context-determined national identity traits, narratives are ways of representing and structuring these ethnic traits.

One of the most frequently used expressions in news bulletins is "Romania ranks last in EU". The targeted aspects are extremely diverse: the standard of living, the standard of education and culture, the number of rich people in the country, the value added tax (VAT) collected, the treatment for various diseases and the level of modernization of the medical field or of various branches of economy, the degree of involvement of the Romanian state in attracting European funds. The media discourse is built on a narrative structure which establishes the coordinates of a competition between contestants, who are not on an equal footing as far as the cultural and moral values are concerned. The EU members are regarded as conquerors in domains which the Romanians barely begin to explore, without many chances of making up for the civilization gap. The rest of the Europeans have solid principles of life, have living standards which the Romanians can hardly dream of, as long as they lack the qualities of those together with whom an organism is formed, such as EU, in which every member must meet strict requirements. Hence the repetitive structure of a black and white story, which compares the successes of the utterly positive collective character, represented by the others, with the failures of the negative character, i.e. the Romanian nation, to adapt to the new order imposed by the EU accession. These narrative structures, which present our psychological and moral traits, as well as our essential values, inferior to the ones of the EU members, influence negatively our feeling of national pride, alter the way we perceive the image of our country. The denigrating connotation stereotypically attached to situations where the Romanians do not manage to score as well as the other Europeans influence the national feeling, bringing about a certain image crisis in the indigenous public.

In print press or online media articles, one may come across headlines which also appear in television news bulletins and which include inculpatory terms for the nation: "blackball for Romania" (http://www.wall-street.ro/articol/Legal-Business/155606/procesul-de-privatizare-a-cfr-marfa-a-esuat.html Este OFICIAL! Am primit inca o bila neagra: privatizarea CFR Marfa a esuat, accessed on 10/14/2013; http://www.paginaeuropeana.ro/bila-neagra-pentru-romania-discriminarea-si-abandonul-subiect-de-intriga-la-nivel-european/ accessed on 08/01/2014; http://poweraxxel.wordpress.com/2013/02/07/romania-in-fata-unui-nou-dezastru-inca-o-bila-neagra-imaginii-in-interiorul-ue/ accessed on 02/07/ 2013). Another expression belonging to the semantic field of failure is "Romania has failed the test in front of the harsh examiners" (http://www.gandul.info/politica/romania-pica-din-nou-testul-comisiei-europene-acordul-de-parteneriat-trimis-de-guvern-este-prea-vag-fara-viziune-si-cu-lectii-neinvatate-11881073, accessed on 01/10/2014).

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In a reportage-investigation broadcast by PROTV, the headline, "Trenule, căruţă mică. CFR pe ultimul loc în Europa" ("Train, you little cart, CFR ranks last in Europe"), is edited as a facile ludic form, hinting at the famous song "Trenule, maşină mică" ("Train, you little car"). The whole reportage is built on the narrative structure of a parallel with the past circumstances, one century and a half ago, and of a comparison with other European states, which places Romania on an inferior level. The media discourse is one which renders inferior the existing state of affairs in our country, as it speaks about the fact that the Romanians "have been defeated by shame and helplessness. Traveling by train has become an ordeal, sometimes full of dangers, and, if we judge by the speed we travel, we seem to have returned to the cart. Romania is moving rearwards. Europe has already left behind the century of speed. It is still difficult to say when we catch up with the Europe of the XXth century. It could be when the Europeans will go on holiday with their children by teleportation. What a disgrace! While high-speed trains have become ever more popular in Europe, traveling by train has become a dangerous adventure in Romania." (http://romaniateiubesc.stirileprotv.ro/emisiuni/2008/trenule-caruta-mica-cfr-este-pe-ultimul-loc-in-europa.html). Thus, the successful story of the Europeans, seen as winners, is constructed, while, conversely, the image of the Romanians is deprived of any aura of national pride. The Romanians seem to be excluded from the privilege club of the Europeans who can be said to be really civilized, because they have pushed the limits of progress to science fiction visions, with hover trains and teleported people. The investigative reporter offers statistical data concerning the alarming frequency of accidents, the derisory speed of trains, unequivocally illustrating the precarious state of the Romanian railway infrastructure. This information is permanently correlated with data which underline the excellent situation in foreign countries. The same irony targeting the weak Romanian performances can be felt by the audience in the PROTV reporter's voice, when the intro of the news titled, on the screen banner, "Cu 160 km/oră" ("At 160km/h"), presents the record of the French, dated seven years ago, regarding the almost five-time higher speed. The declaration given in a short interview by some traveler, who ridicules the situation in Romania, exacerbates the reporter's depreciatory intention directed towards those who are held responsible. (PROTV News Bulletin, 19.007 pm, 07/04/2014)

The lack of the latest technology, which might greatly influence the diminution of the bureaucracy of public institutions, is signaled by comparison with other EU countries, where the modernizing process was successfully implemented years ago: the small number of Romanians who use the computer to pay their taxes outlines the situation of an entire country, which is well behind the general progress in Europe, while the headline of the news story is edited using the denigrating generalization: "Statul român este offline" ("The Romanian state is offline") (http://stirileprotv.ro/special/statul-roman-e-offline-doar-1-din-20-de-romani-a-folosit-in-2013-site-urile-institutiilor-publice.html, accessed on 06/20/2014).

In a news bulletin on Kanal D, on 16th of July this year, the newsreader's irony can be sensed in his appeal to the image of the Romanian nation in the collective conscious: Romania is a country where something unusual relative to common logic, happens on a daily basis. This intrigues but, at the same time, ceases to be something new, because it has become regular, accepted as such by all citizens. The intro of a news account may be edited in a facile, humorous register, which connotes, however, the denigrating side to a country where deceased persons are charged with imputations of payments: "The Romanian nation is funny, we all know it! Not a single day goes by

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without an incident that strikes you dumb." (http://www.kanald.ro/starea-natiunii--mortul-care-primeste-notificari-de-plata-a-ratelor_42506.html#sthash.PZTOSN7h.dpuf). The same irony, directed to this negative uniqueness, is encountered in the expression "Sure ain't no one like us!", which occurs in the commentary of a newsreader at "Observator" ("The Observer") (Antena 1, 4 p.m., 06/06/2014). It presents the investment of hundreds of thousands lei in a nonfunctional toilet to be used by pupils who learn in a deteriorated school. One of the faults of the Romanian people, often discussed in the news bulletins, refers to its inability to elect the right leaders of the state institutions and of the government. Many shortcomings derive from this fact, one of the most obvious being related to the ill-spent state revenues, which brings no real profit to the welfare of the population.

At "Observator special" ("The Special Observer"), on Antena 1 (8 pm, 04/11/2014), the newsreader's commentary is ironic - "anything is possible in Romania". He appeals again to what is immutably engraved in the collective mentality, namely the idea that Romania is the country of endless possibilities, yet opposed to the well-known expression, which is used to label USA. The news story presents a fact which sheds an uncomplimentary light on Romania, by comparison with other countries, namely the unpaved roads. The reporter's hints belong to the same sphere of ridiculing the generalized state of affairs existing in the country: "There is always room for worse in our country. Romania is finally a champion of something. Of bad roads."

Another way of underlining the Romanians' inferior level is the one which appears in a news story written as following: "some foreigners did the cleaning in order to show us what civilization means, while our folks contented themselves to watching full of admiration." It refers to students from 12 European countries, the modality indicator "our folks" being used ironically, to clearly separate us from the other Europeans (*PROTV News Bulletin*, 7 pm, 05/02/2014). The stereotype in the European collective conscious, according to which the Romanians do not entirely abide by the laws, comes up in a reportage broadcast on the TV programme "Asta-i România" ("That's Our Romania") (Kanal D, 8 pm, 06/07/2014), in which the reporter's commentaries denigrate the character of his fellow citizens. Only the Romanians have inventive methods of stealing: "The Romanian is used to breaking any rule". In a news story at "Observator" ("The Observer") (7 pm, 12/14/2012), the journalist presents the compromising situation of Romania, which ranks last in Europe in what concerns the integration of disabled persons on the labour market. The commentary incriminates the employers, who were subjects to the reporter's test, carried out on site. He constructs an incisive, disclosing discourse: "The numbers are cold and tough. Work is for the strong. Without saying it directly, most of the Romanian employers prefer to hide behind big words such as competitiveness and capitalism."

One must also mention the journalistic technique which harms the image of Romania by presenting some cases considered paradoxical by the media discourse. Such is the case of a reportage for the programme "Reporterii Realității" ("The Reality's Reporters") (Realitatea TV, 06/09/2013), which states the following: "Paradoxically, Romania is the fourth state in Europe when it comes to natural resources, and the last one when it comes to their use."

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Conclusions

In some media items, starting from studies and statistic data, the journalists construct a discourse which diminish the positive image of the country. This damage in terms of image determines a state of inferiority relative to other EU states, a diminution of trust in Romanian people's chances of success, of competing with the progress of the others, seen as participants in a competition where Romania has the disadvantage of a start delayed by years of regress at the level of economic development and civilization evolution. Identity narrative structures of media stories play an important part in shaping some depreciatory traits of the national portait, and the result is a constructed low self-esteem image on national identity.

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