IDENTITY AND ALTERITY IN THE MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF THE EUROPEAN REGULATIONS

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Abstract: *The Romanian integration in the European Union took an effort to adapt to the new regulations of this Community. This process has generated a rather artificial assimilation of those regulations by the Romanian citizens. In the media representations, this observation is more present, surprisingly, in the soft news (or human interest stories), where the effort of the Romanians to understand and follow the European regulations in different aspects of their social life is more obvious. When adapting to the regulations was not possible, a process of "adapting" and bending the rules took place. They were interpreted from a personal point of view (evaluated as a sign of social intelligence, of "cunningness"), then they were subjected to various ironies along with the European Union itself and finally those regulations were considered as mysterious signs of alterity.*

Keywords: *news, soft news, representations, regulations (norms), European Union, alterity*

Romania's accession to the European Union on 1 January, 2007 was no more than a formal process, implying transformation of internal social and institutional structures through constraint rather than deep assimilation. There is, however, a huge difference between accession and integration. From the moment of the accession (and even before that) the Europeanization process is initiated, aiming the transformation of society in its entirety. The newly accessing countries in the European Union are first and foremost interested in implementing the new regulations (Beciu, 2007: 58); however the full Europeanization process does not mean automatic translation of values, norms and practices but their assimilation. The Europeanization of the Romanian society has mostly taken place through formal mechanisms: implementation of the European regulations, norms, values and symbols at institutional level. However, all those have not generated pro-European behaviours and attitudes, too, such that this process finally generates European identity (Beciu, 2009: 195). The Romanian citizens have thus been obliged to adopt rules that were alien to them, without having the possibility to negotiate them, as those rules had already been established by the builders of the European Union. As was to be expected, those rules clashed with certain local values and mentalities and sometimes even with the cultural and historic heritage. Once the Union demanded giving up those peculiarities, tension, discontent and even anxiety have been generated. As all those could not be openly expressed, very elaborated constructions were generated at the level of the imaginary and collective representations.

Information about the European Union reach the citizens through the press, which makes it pointless for us to insist on the overwhelming role it is being playing on the dissemination of information about the Union. On analyzing the relationship between national media and the European Union, studies have prevailingly focused on the media's efficiency in disseminating information about EU policies and on the impact of the media as regards Europeanization.

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The press initially delivered a bureaucratic and technical type of discourse, conveyed in institutional terms, difficult to comprehend and unattractive. The discourse on accession, though present in the press on a daily basis was rendered from the standpoint of declarations made by Romanian and European political leaders (having actually been called "expert-type" discourse), ending by being abstract. Only the image of the expert is personalized, whereas the non-governmental and non-institutional actors are not very visible (Beciu, 2007: 27-28, 58). When it exists, this type of discourse focuses on the discrepancy between "Deep Romania", "us" and "Europe". This discourse targets a collective identity. Even though openness towards Europe exists, the European project comes in collision with local traditions and mentalities. Thereafter, the debate on the EU issue could not be translated for the ordinary citizen to comprehend it. Debate forums, politicians and even the press have all learned a neo wooden language, forgetting whom it is destined to. That is why we can say that a real public debate almost never truly existed.

"Romanian media reflects only to a small extent or sometimes in a deformed manner the difficulties encountered by people in adapting to the challenges implied by the transformation of the whole society, generated by Romania's accession in the European Union and giving birth to novel social, economic and political models. The media reflects these transformations either through means taken from the West European media or through a strictly local approach. In both situations, the real issues of the Romanian society's Europeanization are eluded" (Schifirneţ, 2011: 35).

The need was felt to adapt the discourse (of both the politicians and the media) about the EU issues to the demands of the Romanian citizens, a process previously undergone in turn by other states before Romania, a process named "domestic adaptation with national colors" (Risse *et al.* 2001: p. 1). The used phrase is "domestication of the news" in the Romanian press as regards the EU information, events, policies and decisions.

Breaking away from that period mainly took place through television, advertising and entertainment shows (like Divertis and Las Fierbinti) which parodied the European norms, however thus succeeding to make them much more intelligible. Three months after accession, the first sign of Euroscepticism, or maybe just a doubt about the intellectual discourse (sympathizing the idea to accept everything coming from the EU as a kind of civilizing, even illuminating, absolute mission, to be undertaken by each and every Romanian) was a satire and humour Festival that took place at Bistriţa, whose European themes were: "With Bulă in Europe", "The wrong person in the wrong Europe", "The European bone", "The United States of Europe"[1].

In the absence of an authentic debate in the media, the description and assessment of certain local realities degenerated into strictly local, even intimate anecdotic, highlighting the Romanian citizen, a European today, not as an active citizen but as an "interpreter" of rules that he neither understands nor accepts. Rules that, furthermore, he tries to befriend with the weapons at hand: irony and wisdom. The Romanian European citizen therefore laughs at his own misfortunes, symbolically signalling the distance that separates him from Europe (maybe through statute and identity but mostly through mentality).

[1] http://www.realitatea.net/bula-in-europa-printre-temele-unui-festival-de-umor-de-la-bistrita_48805.html#ixzz34KpdIdPP

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Research design and results

The results of my research, which I will display further, are the secondary data of a more ample research performed throughout 2012 on a corpus of 11,000 pieces of TV news. The research targeted to disclose the place an influence of the "unimportant news" in the economy of the televised news bulletin of the most important TV channels in Romania. It mainly used qualitative techniques (content analysis). Among this news, there is news about integration, the European Union, the "Romanian" manner of understanding and integrating so important information. The research eliminated the "hard" news in favour of the "soft" ones[1]. At the level of public perception, the media discourse on the European issues, especially on norms and regulations is very different : on the one hand, an aseptic, neutral, non-intelligible, expert-type language (dealt with above) and on the other hand exotic, trivializing, attracting information, avoiding, however, real civic involvement.

The relationship of the Romanians with the European Union is heavily mocked at by the TV channels. News is broadcast where Romanians fail to interpret information regarding the norms or restrictions imposed by the Union, but the most frequent news is that where Romanians « adapt » to the norms, giving them a reading in accordance with their known cultural universe. As in the case of Dorel[2], the advertising field must have held priority in exploiting a vein pertaining to deeply cultural mentalities and habits. A production dated 2007, right before Romania becoming a member of the EU, a beer commercial (Bucegi), highlights in just one reply all that we use to call « Romanian cunningness » and adaptation of rules: four friends are having a chat in a pumpkin field as they are guarding melons, one of the chatters holding an somewhat undergrown melon and saying: « Hey, listen, these European norms, they say that all melons must be big. I don't know what we will do with these small ones ». The answer comes from an interlocutor who pours beer from a bottle: « Well, we will say that they are beans ». The others laugh like hell, as the friend with the wise reply adds: « As for this one, recycling calls it!», throwing the bottle of beer into a waste basket filled with other bottles[3].

News mainly focuses on the incorrect, fraudulent or abusive use of European funds. The news notices:

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[1] An abstract of this reseach may be read at: http://www.unibuc.ro/studies/index.php?path=Doctorate2014Martie%2FMARGHIOALA+CRISTINA+-+Abordari+ale+faptului+divers+in+emisiunile+informative+TV+din+Romania/

[2] The character „Dorel", created by a tv comercial for a popular brandy (Unirea) dating back to the years 2000 has become the archetype of the Romanian worker: clumsy, mocked at by veteran mates, who are able to advice him, yet without helping him, since they are busy playing dice. Dorel is an improviser in everything he ventures to do, believing that "it will do", until he nearly messes everything completely, ending on a hospital bed after having sectioned several electric cables with a pick axe, leaving a whole residential district in darkness! As an archetype, Dorel is a reverse Bulă, that is he is right-minded guy, yet unlucky and a bit dolt, whereas Bulă is smart, even though unreliable, able to keep a clean face in every messy occasion. Dorel improvises in every situation, works superficially, is the victim of delicate situations and is also mocked at by his work mates. This commercial also succeeded to introduce a number of expressions in everyday language, like: „Any problems, Gogu?" „You rooootate and hit with the sharp side!" „Dorel, will you keep us here longer?" „Will we move with more talent?" and to set forth a charming character.

[3] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yjjHiOaUlvE

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1. Frauds, embezzlements, corruption and incompetence of the public servants, abusive use of the European funds, allocation of financing for projects that are never put in practice:

- farmers who obtain the money but never produce anything, trusting the existence of a legislative flaw; since there is no technical possibility to control every fund beneficiary, they are controlled randomly. The result is that farmers get the money, then they…take the chance, gambling on that they will not be caught.

> Şercaia commune, Braşov County. Five years ago, a German investor went there with great plans put on paper. Locals say that he has been receiving subsidies ever since. For 200 hectares and zero work, our German guy, anyway long gone from Romania, receives at least 32,000 Euro annually. Our officials took his word for granted in that he was set to work and took no pain to check whether wheat grows on his plot or weeds multiply in grandeur.

A TV channel criticizes the incompetence in a ironical key: *The head of APIA, the institution granting these subsidies says that he cannot do anything, as this is the "fashion" all over the continent* and displays the possible consequences: „*However, because it affords to follow the trends, Romania risks suspension of these subsidies* (...) (6 April, 2012, PRO TV).

- one farmer in Brasov receives almost 500,000 EURO annually to raise sheep and cows and for pastures (the subsidy is 40 lei per sheep, 400 lei per cow and 280 EURO per land hectare). Asked where the animals are, the farmer answers: *Those I used to have became salami, NATO meat, and I have sold from it.* In exchange, the farmer knows legislation, he knows that the flaws in European legislation allow him to do what he is been doing. European Union experts rely on the farmer's honesty, and the latter takes full advantage of that. *The law says that even if I no longer have the animals, I will receive the subsidy until 2014.* (PRO TV, 4 April, 2012)

- farmers who break the property law through "disturbance of possession", in their attempt to obtain, whatever the means, European funds that are granted for land leasing. The trick is the following: first they plough the peoples' plots then they ask those people if they want to give up the lands.

> 40 villagers from Voineşti commune, Iaşi County found their 100 ha pasture ploughed overnight. They then found out that the culprits would be the owners of an agricultural association from a neighbouring locality. For the most part, those plots were ploughed owned by people over 70 of age. The stake is the subsidy for every hectare – about 150 EURO received from APIA (PRO TV, 8 December, 2012).

Conclusions: The European legislation has gaps or relies on the honesty of people. That is what those that infringe it exploit, using cunningness and wisdom in eluding regulations. In most cases, the neighbours are those who notice misbehaviours or denounce the farmers who break the law. Is this civil attitude or envy ("let the neighbour's goat die, too" as Romanians say)?

2. Bizarre subsidies, which are ridiculed:

There is plenty of news usually concerning the clumsiness of Romanians in complying with norms and regulations, their intelligence and attempts to adapt those rules (attempts valued as proofs of cunningness and capabilities to bend the rules), like those displayed above, but also a component where the EU is a direct subject for irony for issuing sometimes picturesque directives. Here is one of those:

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> EU money for butterflies and geese. Land owners may receive up to 240 EURO per hectare, if they host on their plot rare species like the red-necked goose. Farmers are not allowed to use chemical fertilizers or... scarecrows (...) Farmers must not prove that those rare species are really there, because specialists know their track... (PRO TV, 7 April, 2012).

> The news highlights here, again, the wisdom displayed by our fellow countrymen:

> Dumitru Funda is a farmer and asked for a subsidy for 30 hectares, i.e. over 7,000 EURO. Now it seems that everyone in the commune sees red-necked geese on their plots (...). Ioan Iuraşcu owns six hectares of land in the area. So far, he has never seen the very rare blue butterflies, but what does that matter if money comes to him from a delicate wing beat (PRO TV, 7 April, 2012).

In another example, an entrepreneur from Alba County has the idea to ask for EU financing to build a touristic complex with thermal waters. The TV channel only selects the most exotic information: pools (though the compound encompasses more than that), in a village (*amidst brambles and maize crops)*, with sulphur waters and heated pools (*with the help of solar panels*), people strolling in bathing suits through the village, mixing in a paradoxical and ironical construction (PRO TV, 28 July, 2012). It must be said that although the information makes it clear that a very serious component is at stake (protecting rare species, for instance, or in the example above, an investment in a touristic and health care compound etc.), TV channels prefer an anecdotic approach, close to the miscellaneous news formula, based on a markedly antithetic construction (following the young-old, good-evil pattern), as is the news about the pool...in the village!

3. The largest section of news about the European Union is the one dedicated to the constraints generated by the application of the European norms triggering huge economic implications but mostly cultural ones (unplanned side effects, not taken into account and which pertain to cultural habits and values).Some are so exotic that they are ridiculed plainly:

- The European Union forbids the balloons, because they do not comply with the new Brussels regulations, they can be swallowed by small children. *According to the directive, children under the age of 8 are no longer allowed to inflate balloons.* Antena 1, 10 October, 2011)

- The European Union bans the reuse of jars for the tinned food made by small producers. The news below is typical to the pattern of elaborating the news regarding European Union regulations at the commercial TV channels.

> After casting glances at the traditional producers, Brussels officials have invented yet another rule: nobody is further allowed to sell goods produced by himself/herself in reused jars. The reason: the chemical sterilizing substances reach directly the pickles and jams.

> "We have lived a lifetime with pickles ("me too, me, too" can be heard in the background) stored in jars by my grandmother, then by my mother. Jars washed clean at home are perfectly OK. In the old days, it was common sense to wash them with lye" a small producer says.

> However, tradition or habit is no argument in Brussels, to the extent that the EU enters the kitchen and changes the producers' plans. More precisely, the Union no longer accepts recycled jars to be used for pickles and jams (my note: so this was the idea!, we are supplied the hidden answer). The new norms aim exactly at the

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> food tinned by the small producers and he/she who does not observe the rule may be held liable. In Great Britain, the fee may amount to £ 5,000. Whom the Union does not think about is no other than the consumer, who would get rid of the risk posed by chemicals used for cleansing if, for instance, the pickles jar were 5 lei more expensive (Antena 1, 13 October, 2012).

This news encompasses the following structure, which leads us to the story's structure: the European Union is out of preoccupations and from time to time, exactly like the "British researchers" it imagines one more rule. → The European Union has something against the small Romanian entrepreneurs (whom it *holds an eye on*, spying on them) and whom the Union wants to destroy. → The European Union has no considerations for traditions and brutally intervenes in the producers' life (*entering their kitchen*). → All these actually hide major interests (the collapse of the recycling market). → "initially, ordinary people suffer and the European Union has something to gain.

Apart from the ironical note, most of the news also contains the "adapted" variant of the regulation, not less full of humour.

> The directive must be applied but Romanians already have solutions at hand. The aim is not to have prices going up and the goods left unsold. "We already have a jar buy back concept. When this year's clients are contented by what they find in these jars, which they will certainly be, they will come with last year's recipient, which we shall fill, supplying the customer with a fresh one..." say a young small producer (13 October, 2012, Antena 1).

Almost every piece of news also contains a possible explanation: what precise hidden interests lay beneath this regulation: *The norm caused waves in Europe and the first to react were the English, who accused the EU of hindering the recycling programs* (13 October, 2012, Antena 1).

Whereas the effects of the economic implications were to a large extent predictable and could be assessed: food selling units obliged to shut down their business because they cannot comply with the imposed hygiene, space and production line norms, nor with the norms regarding the health of the animals (which would require a very large investment), farmers constrained by the too high standards to give up raising certain animals in favour of other more profitable ones, the cultural implications of such regulations are more difficult to assess, thus also becoming more difficult to apply.

For instance, a piece of news, about the obligation of slaughter houses to operate with staff qualified and certified to perform animal killing operations automatically makes us think at the way pigs are sacrificed on Ignatius Day, an old tradition with Romanians. Will people be obliged to call qualified specialists and give up the person the most qualified in the mind of every Romanian: the village specialist, known by everybody, who performs the job every year?

Actually, this is the news involving most strikingly the imaginary. The European Union becomes "the alien", "the other", which the community expels and since it cannot oppose, it stores anger against him. Attacking traditions is an almost taboo subject. Things that Romanians had been doing traditionally for hundreds of years in a certain way will have to be done differently under the threat of sanctions: they will have to anaesthetize pigs before sacrifice on Ignatius Day, they will have to sell at the

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market eggs inscribed with numbers, will no longer be allowed to milk cows bare handed, or fabricate plum brandy in their own stills. All those are terrifying, scaring to death the ordinary citizen and causing him to endemically repel the Union.

We would expect such rules to stir popular revolt in villages but that has not happened. In just a few cases it really generated public debate and shaped attitudes. Faced with this anxious situation, that they could not have imagined, Romanians kept silent, obeying only theoretically, yet without applying the law. They "adapted" it, following the phrase: "we say what they say but we do what we do". The most known such cases after accession, that attacked the very spiritual being of the Romanians were those referring to pig killing and dead persons burial.

In these two situations, not even the Bucharest officials complied with regulations, "expecting regulations not to be adopted", as the news of the time flashed titles, warning on the danger of estranging and rejecting the European Union, which has actually happened:

> Close to the first Romanian Euro-Christmas, even officials in Bucharest hope that this rule is not applied. They warned the Commission that this interference in the Christmas tradition is the fastest way to destroy the positive attitude of the Romanian towards the EU, the publication also notes (my note: the publication is The Economist). Romanian veterinarians expect 1.5 million pigs be sacrificed in households at Christmas this year (Antena 3, 22 November, 2007).

The European Union is itself at a deadlock: although the rule has been issued and must be applied, as Romanian TV channels put it, Europe "will turn a blind eye" if, in fact, it is not applied.

> It is however possible that the Brussels officials tacitly accept that Romanians will break the Union's directive when they sacrifice pigs on Christmas, understanding that Romania has much more serious problems, that could, for instance trigger withdrawal of EU funds for agriculture, according to The Economist (Antena 3, 22 November, 2007).

Actually, the discussion is so complicated that even semantic interpretations are approached: *Last year,* (my note, the year at stake is 2006), *during the discussions in Brussels, Romanians asked if sacrificing pigs at Christmas could be granted the exception status that Muslim and Jewish butchers enjoy, but the Commission said it would not allow that. The exception only refers to religious rites, whereas the Romanian practices in question are not considered rites but traditions* (Antena 3, 22 November, 2007).

In an article in *The Economist*, the same referred to by the cited news, the publication agrees under the title *A dissertation on Romanian pork* that sometimes it is better that European rules are not applied by the book: *Sometimes it is better not to apply the full rigour of European rules*, reminding that this tradition had preserved *even the dark, kill-joy years of communism*[1].

Under the title *EU forbids traditional burial ceremonies*, two years from accession another directive attacks yet another tradition:

> *Starting next year, Romanians will have to bury their dead in accordance with European norms. Thus, the clothes of the deceased will have to be biodegradable and the shoes made of cart board. Transport will have to be performed in special, authorized vehicles, by no means in carts as it is usual in many rural areas. The*

[1] http://www.economist.com/node/10131771

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> *death watch will no longer take place at home, nor will it last for three days, as the Romanian tradition says. The dead one will be seen to a chapel and hired mourners will also be banned* (Antena 1, 14 December, 2009).

Priests are rendered indignant, yet they have no courage to express openly but only under anonymity: *Such EU norms are against the tradition observed by our people. Romanians keep and mourn their dead one at home for three days. It must also be taken into account that these EU norms infringe a provision of the EU Charter which clearly stipulate that peoples' traditions must be respected*[1].

However, none of these rules, though adopted, are applied. Meanwhile, as time goes by TV channels don't even bother to keep up appearances: they broadcast news from death watches, report extensively from pig sacrificing ceremonies and reporters even taste rind in front of the camera, ignoring what should really be done according to the norms.

In conclusion, the Romania opposes at a symbolical level the "civilizing mission" emerging from the "centre" – the European Union, the later bearing in the collective imaginary the "alterity" the "alien" capable to storm his traditions, his century-long habits in the name of a suspect "asepticism" beneath which, in reality, economic interests disadvantageous to the Romanian hide. As a supreme and mutually accepted sign of protest, the Romanian eats rind, observes the funeral feast, goes on keeping the dead at home and even finds amusement at the absurdity of certain regulations which, choked by bureaucracy, have forgotten the profoundly humane dimension they imply.

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