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Appealing to the case of Romania, captured at the inaugural moment of the Great Union in 1918, when the foundations for a modern national state were laid, the study focuses on the role of the memory in the establishment of the “imagined communities” (Benedict Anderson) which are the nations. The hypothesis is that the national identity is the outcome of a multitude of distinctive characteristics and of their persistence in time. These are some of the features “recounted”, namely the founding narrations / myths that we ourselves tell to each other and/or the ones that others tell about us. Inoculated educationally and interiorized polemically, such collective myths are responsible for both the identity fluctuations and for the way in which, temporally, the political stands in a multi-ethnic state are being renegotiated.

In a Europe torn between nostalgia and anguish, Romania gave, at the end of First World War I, the impression of a distinctive land of hope. The end of the hostilities coincided to the country with the accomplishment of an old ideal and of a grand political project: the union of Transylvania with the Kingdom of Romania¹. The context and the means by which the Great Union took place determined the perception of the event by the Romanians as more of a miracle than of the success of the coherent conduct and political effort.

The pervasive exhilaration stimulated the expression of a (new) political, national and community project, that the historical moment and the logic of the European revolution recommended it as necessary. Practically, the fresh Romanian state set up two major connective objectives: on one hand, the state reform and the democratization of the society, and on the other, the national consolidation (economical, cultural and moral).

The last aspect, considered a priority by the new power, would have expanded itself on two directions.

On a microstructural level, a re-balancing of the historical provinces separated from the Austro-Hungarian and from the Tsarist Empires was necessary. Their incorporation accentuated the internal social and cultural diversification. While Transylvania and Bukovina were beneficiating from a civilisation close the Central European one, Bessarabia presented many of the traits of an outdated peasant system. On the other side, the Romanian Kingdom had kept some of the unstructured influences of the Orient.²

In the interior of the newly encompassed province (Transylvania) the explicit stake was the recover on the historical handicap of Romanians, the coming out of the marginal condition and the bearing of the condition of protagonist on the new political scene (what has been called as “the restoration of the Romanian element”). It was considered that the action was morally entitled (the sense of justice itself was imposing it) and politically justified.

¹ At a time a principality, integrated in the Habsburg monarchy, but maintaining its own borders and its institutional and legislative autonomy, Transylvania belonged, in 1867, to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Along with the formation of the dualism, Transylvania was encompassed to Hungary, having its autonomy suppressed.

² The contrast between archaism and modernity would remain an exotic constant of interwar Romania, identified by both the foreign observers and by the Romanian analysts.

If on the national component of its ambitious project, the Romanian state expected inherent difficulties, it seemed that the reforms meant to accomplish the democratisation could have been assumed by the entire community. The community project had a greater amplitude and could have generated the citizenship resonance necessary for its coming into being as it offered more points of convergence (other than ethnical) and allowed mutual strategies for progression.

However, the plans had not unfolded as expected. The nationalist ideology, increasingly active in the years that would follow, did not leave enough manoeuvre space to civic action, installing a logic of exclusion.

Doubtless, the Union of 1918 represented, for the Romanian citizens, a turning point. It contained, as a tight ball of thread, the marks of the past, but also the promises and uncertainties of the future.

The political triumph was indisputable. The Greater Romania, as the outcome of World War I, was a new and multi-shaped reality. It had entered the war, in 1916, measuring 130 000 square kilometres and numbering a population of 8 million; at the exit, it counted an extra 170 000 square kilometres and 10 million inhabitants³. But it also had one new problem: **the minorities**. Out of the 18 million, over 5 represented the minority. The issue was of primal importance⁴.

The ratification of the Union of 1918 by the Great Powers, through the Peace Treaty of Trianon, that imposed a new existential border to a vast population, brought with itself, in Romania, a sudden change in paradigm. It established as the starting point of a radical mutation, consisting, among others, in a drastic shift of positions between ethnical minority and majority.

The **Hungarians** represented the most significant statistical, ethnical and socio-political minority of Transylvania⁵, an exponential minority with a significant symbolic fund. They were followed by the **Germans** (approximately 545 000 in Transylvania, standing for about 9,8% of the population of the province and 4,3% out of the total population of Romania). Immigrated from everywhere, from Spain, Poland, Galicia, Germany, the **Jews** were, according to the census of 1930, in a number of 178 421 in Transylvania (about 3,2%) and 1.050 000 on the entire territory. (Romania ranked third in Europe in terms of the number of Jews). To those were added **Gypsies, Serbs** (in greatest number – 43 500 as recorded by the 1930 census – out of the diverse nationalities that, along Slovaks, Ruthenians and a few Bulgarians, formed the Slavic element) and **Turks**.

³ The dates vary.

⁴ In Europe, after World War I, the minorities reached impressive proportions: about 40 millions, 12,4% out of the entire population. For Romania, in particular, the problem of the minority and the anxiety the new national assembly had aroused unleashed the dispute over the multiethnic state and the federalism. Minority intellectuals were trying to accredit the idea that Greater Romania was a “mixt” composite state. On the contrary, Romanian authors intensified efforts and multiplied arguments to rebut this thesis. The “national unity state” / “polyglot state” conflict, that would culminate in the debates regarding the voting of the Constitution in 1923, did not represent, obviously, a simple scholar controversy. It corresponded to some distinct interests and covered diverse political visions, even contradictory. Thus, to the principle of ethnic centralism, promoted by the Romanians, the minorities balanced against with the one of the increased autonomy. In this context, the correlation of the minority policy with the principle of securing the borders became a national imperative, it also being needed to reconcile the fear of irredentism of the minorities with the external exigence of their protection.

⁵ About 1 350 000 inhabitants were Hungarians, representing 24,4% of the population of Transylvania and 7% of the population of Romania. However, they did not form a compact and unitive ethnic block, being spreaded all over Transylvania, even if more concentrated in some regions.

The great event of the Union positioned differently the new citizens of Romania and, to a great extent, determined the relational dynamic between the majority and the minority⁶. As a foundation stood a polar thinking that would divide the population of the country into two opposed axiological categories: “autochthon” vs. “stranger”, endemic vs. allogene, sojourner. The age of a political competition was thus inaugurated, in which every protagonist had its advantages and its weaknesses.

Out of all the inter-ethnic relations, the most acute turned out to be the ones with the Hungarians, so divergent, that the problem of the minority had inclined to become the Hungarian problem.

As for themselves, the Hungarians illustrated, in 1918, the type of trans-bordered community. They lived in Romania, but the ethnos, the language, the habits and their national sympathies belonged to a neighbour “mother-land” (Hungary). A nation existed, a state of origin, and also a conscience of affiliation to that nation, that had formed before the separation imposed by the Treaty of Trianon. The aspirations of the Hungarian minority in Transylvania continued to develop in connexion with these correlations; so did the separatist and revisionist movements.

In 1918, the political state of the Hungarians from Transylvania changed dramatically. From a population with a lead role in the state, they found themselves, overnight, in a paradoxical situation: disunited from the “great Hungarian nation”, torn out of the body of the Great Hungary and integrated as a minority in the Romanian state, in which, of course, the Romanians, according to their majority number and their new political qualities, were summoned to take control of the public life.

The reversal of the political roles explained the opposed reference of Romanians and

⁶ The attitude of the minority from Greater Romania towards the new power, and consequently towards its own condition, was different. It oscillated in three definitive directions. On one side, it existed a form of neutral acceptance of the status of minority (that mainly characterised the Germans), correlated with a passive attitude or limited to the interest of conserving one’s own identity. Another category of minority (among which the Hungarians) recognised, rationally, its status (the reality called for it) but was denying it from a psychological level, displaying a “bad conscience” of the condition of minority. The uninvesting that it imposed was compensated by hostility, more or less direct, towards the social and political present order, continuously suspected, but also by civic actions. The refuse of identification blended, in their case, with a conscience (vain) of their own loneliness. They preferred to define themselves not by the elements that had approached them to Romanians, by what they had in common, but by what was different and, being different, differentiated them. Finally, partial and discontinuous, the concept of “minority” had undergone, in time, a process of positive re-evaluation, a mutation that was for example visible and fulfilled culturally in the theory of Transylvanianism.

On the Romanian side, a tendency to represent the national body as a closed, homogenous circle could be observed. Without being excluded, the joining was possible only after some acceptance rituals that would certify the adhesion and the emotional attachment of the applicant. An ideal situation was aimed, even obsessively desired, of non-conflict, of perfect and spontaneous social harmony.

In fact, the official attitude of Romanians towards the minority depended upon the position adopted by each minority against the new Romanian state, following almost exclusively the criterion of fidelity. The diagram of the reports of Romanians with the minority, in the interwar period, was, *grosso modo*, the following: towards the Germans and Hungarians an authentic will of assimilation was manifested. The aim was for them being absorbed, integrated and included within the body of the majority’s nation. It must be mentioned that, in regard to Germans, there was a greater availability for dialogue from the Romanian government, while authoritarian tendencies were reserved to the Hungarians. Contrariwise, the attitude towards the Jews was antropoemic : it was desired that they be, as possible, shadowed, isolated or marginalised, when not directly banished from the social body.

According to the evolution of the events and the actions of the minorities, the affective connotation of Romanians towards them would change from one case to another, from one moment to another. Over the interwar period, according to the historical and political context, the xenophobic and intolerant attitudes coexisted with the positive and democratic ones.

Hungarians towards the Union. If for the Romanians, it was an inaugural moment, that set the foundations of a new state (Greater Romania) and placed the national history on an ascensional role, in the life of the Hungarians it brought a dramatic moment of crisis, accompanied by a sense of uncertainty, insecurity and anxiety, a “vertigo of the future”.

The significances that both attributed to the common event that marked their existence irreversibly were, thus, diametrically opposed. Romanians granted the act of the union of Transylvania with Romania with establishing values, which availed the embarking in a journey of construction. The Union represented to them the necessary positive fact able to mobilize them in the effort for identity reconstruction that stood in front of them. Simultaneously with the ecstatic national freedom, with the impatience and restlessness it implied, they felt capable of a will of social reconstruction. In opposition, the loss of the war and the disintegration of Great Hungary brought along, for the Hungarians in Transylvania, the shame of a terrible failure. That is why they associated to the act of the Union, if not thanatical, crepuscular meanings: an empire had fallen – that had belonged to them –, a country collapsed – that had been theirs – a world had been extinguished – that represented the only place where they had truly felt the feeling of *home*.

One might say that this was where it all began: what the Hungarians experienced as a dramatic national fracture was celebrated by the Romanians as an apotheosis. While some were living the joy of victory, the others were faced with the bitter taste of defeat. For the “greatly-lucky Romanians”, “the days of glory” seemed to begin: “Today, obviously, the conditions have changed – admits Alexandru Hodoș. All possibilities lay beyond us. We have only open horizons. We have, at last, the so desired freedom.”⁷ On the contrary, the imperative of resignation invaded the conscience of the Hungarians in Transylvania. To them, it seemed that the peace and the joy were no longer possible. The horizons were closing and obstructed the perspectives. The lights were fading, indicating, in the future, only sufferance and despair. Above all these laid a general feeling of incapacity that paralysed all efforts, in a universe of general extinction: “Our eye gazed [...] towards the west”⁸, wrote in the press of the days, Károly Kós, one of the elite Hungarian intellectuals. “I saw there how the sun had set. Our eye, drowned with hopes, faith, yearning and pain looked until tears burst from the effort. For the sun continued its path always descending, it set more and more; at first slowly, then quicker, in the end it disappeared, and in the sky only the crimson clouds of blood-coloured hue remained.”⁹

The new common life thus started with difficulty and tension, in an atmosphere electrified emotionally by profound anti-ethical feelings. The tonic mood of the Romanians contrasted violently with the immense frustration of the Hungarians. The Union represented the best engine for re-establishing self-esteem, for the first ones, while the last, it induced a psychological breach between the aspiration for grandeur – asserted by the invocation of a glorious past and the refuse of considering it perished – and the prosaic present. Separated up to opposition, none of them was ready to accept the other’s situation with detachment, to understand his condition and accept him under his new appearance.

In this context, what could have consisted in an authentic inaugural moment of a future

⁷ Alexandru Hodoș, *Dușmanul din noi înși-ne*, in „Țara Noastră”, V (1924), nr. 31 (3 aug.), p. 970-971.

⁸ Hungary has Romania as its Western neighbour.

⁹ Károly Kós, “Glasul care strigă”, [1921], in Lucian Nastasă, Levente Salat (editori), *Maghiarii din România și etica minoritară (1920-1940)*, Cluj, Centrul de resurse pentru diversitate etnoculturală, 2003, p. 45.

common existence, turned into an inefficient (even risible) dispute over the past, interpreted in a polemical manner. The memory of the past placed the orientation towards the future in between brackets.

The past was not an interest in itself, but was “approached or recognised only as long as it/ was/ experienced as affecting the purposes and interests of the present, and consequently, the concerns and passions of the present (including the aspirations and anxieties about the future) could not /have been/ but re-read back, in the past”¹⁰.

The memory of the past consumed together by the Romanians and Hungarians was divergent. On one hand, each invoked other calendar data and other names of this history to be celebrated as founding and legendary – that were attributed rituals and ceremonies sacrosanct for some, emptied of meaning for the others –, on the other hand, most of the times, the same dates and events of the past were given a different significance, often opposed.

The divergence in the lectures of history violently stands out when, for example, one of the fundamental myths is called into play: *the myth of origin*.

The dissensions upon the precedence in Ardeal had, firstly, a political base: the primacy *in* Ardeal was read, on both sides, as primacy *upon* Ardeal. However, the consensus could not be obtained also because in this dispute, unsolved to this day, in fact two types of memories of the past are opposed.

The Hungarians display with ostentation the vanity of a material history, invoking a super eminence in Ardeal that can be tested by means of the written and re-enacted documentary history. On the contrary, in order to prove their primacy, Romanians call upon the live memory – an “immemorial memory” – that drives the origin into myth. This age that foregoes history, logically and historiographically argued, is sustained by the force of the imagination and of the emotion of an entire community, passed down (orally) from generation to generation, persisting in the conscience of the contemporaries. The fact that, as Romanians believe, represents in itself the ultimate argument, invincible, that turns superfluous any effort of material research of the ancient past.

Regarding the recent history, the issue closes the opposition between *memory* and *oblivion*. There is a common past, that the Hungarians don't **want** to forget (as it is a glorious one that consolidates the self-esteem) and that the Romanians *cannot* forget (as it is traumatic)¹¹. The fact is that the fundamental narrations do not coincide. Inverting the myths – in a given situation one has manifested a “victim complex”, the other a “saviour complex” and the reverse –, the Romanians and the Hungarians have launched in a competition with no winner of interpreting the past. Each assesses as unfaithful the other's recollection and manifests the tendency of constantly imposing its own memory over the past. Strongly anchored in the past, the Romanians and the Hungarians are not yet ready to free themselves from it and don't accept any relativization. That is why precisely the memory of the past represents one of the main factors that preclude, for the moment, the hypothesis of solidarity in destiny.

Thus, what could have established as a (new) beginning, an excellent opportunity of re-evaluating up compromised relations, torn by a conflicted past, that had condemned the

¹⁰ Leonard J. Lamm, *Ideea de trecut*. Istorie, știință și practică în psihanaliza americană, translated by Adriana Neagu, Binghamton&Cluj, Ed. Sigmund Freud, 1995, p. 96.

¹¹ Apud Eniko Magyari-Vincze, *Antropologia politicii identitare naționaliste*, Cluj, Editura Fundației pentru Studii Europene, 1997, pp. 128-130.

Romanians and the Hungarians from Ardeal to live in parallel histories, transformed into a community handicap. The installed passionate climate, charged by conflicts, left little chance for a real meeting.

The memory of conflict of the past and the ideological battle it initiated blocked, at the beginning of the interwar epoch, the initiatives of the cultural forthcoming and cohabitation, substituted by the confrontation of the nationalisms. More precisely, of two nationalisms structurally competing, equally justified morally, but of which the cohabitation was politically impossible.

In the case of the Romanians, the nationalist spirit was kept alive by the late political unification and by the assumed imperative of identity reconstruction, through the consolidation of the national element. In that moment of a beginning, the Romanian nationalism (triumphant) marked the translation from the combatant nationalism to the one of consolidation of the state around one principal nation, easily majoritarian from a numerical point of view.

In exchange, the Hungarian nationalism feeds on a contradictory feeling: of frustration, on one hand, and of vanity, on the other. The Hungarians perceive the condition of “minority” as a double degradation: by the marginality that any groups placed in a position of numerical inferiority assumes, but mostly by the diminishing, by the decrease that the integration, against their will, as a minority precisely in Romania (a margin of Europe) has implied. The Hungarians of Transylvania feel that, as Romanian citizens, do not become only minority but a minority of an inferior culture, which places them, in their conscious, within a “marginality of marginality”. This imaginary excess of humiliation attacks the feeling of dignity as a Hungarian, strengthening their spirit of resistance. At the same time, the conscience of the cultural superiority and of civilization in regard to the Romanians¹² preserves their vanity. At a symbolical level, they continue to represent themselves as a “hegemonic” nation. The pride of the glorious past and the conscience of their cultural superiority have continued to infiltrate in the Hungarian minority in Romania the nationalist resentment¹³.

The two contrary attitudes, of rise and fatality, on one hand, and vanity, on the other, generated a unique tendency, fuelled with an interest by Budapest (the capital of Hungary), of keeping or even maximizing the difference against the Romanians.

¹² The Hungarians had a secular tradition of the exercise of the political power.

¹³ The fact that, up until the Second World War, both the Romanians and the Hungarians had maintained ponderate positions proved to be a benificent and redemptive fact.

The governments that passed on the power of the country have manifested, with some exceptions, the belief that the minority policy must be integrated in legality, considering that it was in the interest of the state to have silence in all the social sectors and segments. In this spirit, they chose to put the problem of the minority under the sign of tolerance and concord. The power, as well as the public opinion, have regarded the relation with the minority from a contractual perspective, that included obligations and opportunities. On her behalf, the intelligentsia (intermittently and not quite efficient) militated in favor of the idea that the minority rights must be assured and not settled politically and electively. It would have been desired for the minority problem to stop being a question of pact between parties, but transforming into a state problem, into a national priority, that transgressed the electoral.

On the other side, the Hungarian minority's offensive did not achieve incontrollable excesses. Despite its retractile attitude, the critical demarche had rarely surpassed the borders of democracy: up until the nationalist collapse during the war, the Hungarians from Romania have appealed to the democratic institutions, employing democratic forms and means, even if, sometimes, also objectionable procedures. Although radical attitudes and moves, even extremist, like the revisionism and irredentism have accompanied relatively consequent the path of self-defining of the Hungarian minority from Transylvania during the interwar period, terrorism and sabotage have been, fortunately, excluded.

The positions of the two ethnical groups, Romanian and Hungarian, would never meet in the interwar period, but in conjuncture. But the sense of confrontation would persist.

The Romanians considered that they have opted for the right minority legislation (see the threat with resembling Yugoslavian nationalist laws) and labelled the actions of the Hungarian minority as a “fight for privileges” (for lost privileges). Our Hungarian minority, they claimed, would never be content as long as they related not to the present status of Romanian citizen, but regarded with nostalgia the lost one, of citizen of the Empire. As for the Hungarians, the preservation of their own identity, often assumed in exclusive terms, remained the main objective. They would engage in action on the narrow but profitable alley of the compensation of the frustration as minority by the guaranteeing of the state of their ethnical and cultural integrity and the enhancement of their own visibility and autonomy.

The shadows of the past reflect upon the present. The mutual suspicion and the conflicts persist, the imputation and the charges more or less accurate don't cease while excessive attitudes represent the currency. The Romanian majority is being criticised by their Hungarian co-habitants for all the deficiencies; they retort arrogating all accomplishments.

Accustomed to see the Hungarian minority as a presumptive enemy¹⁴, the Romanians perceive its effort of building a new and modern administrative structure that would reflect its historical presence in Ardeal, as anti-Romanian. Reciprocally, the Hungarians believe that the Romanians have lingered in an attitude of idealising the conquered position and disqualifying of the minorities.

The Romanians impute to the Hungarians the non-pacifying conscience, un-reconciled with the new realities and accuse them of the sick memory of lost privileges. The Hungarians reject the accusation and self-define the action as a fight for democracy, accusing, at their turn, the Romanians of political duplicity.

The opinions are always opposed. The era of national harmony, that the Romanians claim they have installed, is being described by the Hungarians as one of ethical prejudice. Instead, what the Hungarians denounce as nationalism is presented by the Romanians as a policy of national consolidation (similar to the one in Central Europe). The fidelity towards the national ideal justifies, in their opinion, any intransigency related to the minority's demands. That is why, their wish of keeping their own identity is interpreted as a desire of rupture, and any action in this respect and for this purpose is considered a challenge that must be suppressed as incompatible with the national and political imperative of the new Romanian state. In this spirit, tolerance itself towards the minority becomes, for the intransigent, a centrifuge to the national ideal of spiritual and cultural cohesion of the Romanians.

The circular nationalism – anti-Hungarianism as reaction to auto-Romanianism and vice versa – has weakened the policy of dialogue. The logic of the approach by culture has been less and less used, in favour of the confrontation on a juridical, ideological and political level. The maximum expectancies on behalf of the Romanians, the radical reactions from the Hungarians have blocked the collaboration initiatives, maintaining a climate of mutual suspicion that allowed the dominance of a permanent state of alert.

In this confronting context, the project of the democratic reconstruction of Romania,

¹⁴ One might say that, in the conscience of the Romanians, the Hungarians play the part of the “other” that spontaneously activates the pattern of confrontation. The presence of this “other” threatens the pertinence of the national construction. Numerically and historically, the Hungarians represent the designated enemy – even fated. That is why, by the common act of coexistence, the internal system of differentiation, legitimate and explicit, becomes problematic, the idealised image of the dominant groups being put into question, which arouses anxiety.

although favourable to both the majority and the minority is not preferred by any of them. Each chooses to act primarily in the sense of strengthening its own ethnical and/or national foundation, out of a common feeling, although motivated differently, of insecurity.

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