THE IMAGE OF ROMANIA AND ITS INHABITANTS THROUGH THE EYES OF FOREIGN STUDENTS

Dr. Cristina DAFINOIU
"Ovidius" University of Constanţa
cristinadafinoiu@yahoo.com

Motto: "*We are close to each other through our nature, yet, miles apart through our customs*." (Confucius)

Rezumat:
În acest articol, am încercat aplicarea unui chestionar (la un număr de 100 de studenţi străini, care veneau atât din ţări europene: Bulgaria, Grecia, Germania, Serbia etc., cât şi din ţări asiatice: Turcia, Turkmenistan sau chiar din America de Sud: Costa Rica), cu scopul de a vedea în ce fel privesc ei ţara noastră. Acest articol nu se vrea un studiu sociologic, ci îşi propune să contureze imaginea României şi a românilor văzută prin ochii acestor străini, tineri care sunt expuşi pentru prima oară unei experienţe în străinătate.
Cuvinte cheie:
Chestionar, studenţi străini, integrare, cultură românească, experienţă.

Abstract:
In this article we tried, after applying a questionnaire (on a number of 100 foreign students, who come both from European countries: Bulgaria, Greece, Germany, Serbia etc., and Asian countries: Turkey, Turkmenistan or even from South America: Costa Rica) in order to see in what way our country is seen by the foreigners who come here for studying.
The article doesn't have the intention of a sociological study, but it sets itself to build an outlining of Romania and Romanians' image through the eyes of these foreigners, young people who are being exposed for the first time to the experience of leaving abroad.
Key-words:
Questionnaire, foreign students, integration, Romanian culture, experience.

The ten-year experience of the Preliminary Year Courses of teaching Romanian as a foreign language for the foreign students, who intend to pursue a university degree in Romania, has enabled us to understand that Romanian culture is often perceived by people belonging to various cultural backgrounds from a perspective which is completely different from our expectation.

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This fact has urged us to resort, at the end of the course, with each series of students, to a questionnaire in order to have an insight into the experience of the foreign students that have studied and lived at least for three years (the minimum for a Bachelor's degree) in Romania.

Although Romania is often perceived as the country where stray dogs roam around the streets, sometimes attacking passers-by (I was frequently asked whether there is a Romanian cult of the dog, if the animal plays any special role in our culture and civilization, since you run into them everywhere), where there are beautiful girls and where Dracula and Hagi are the most popular characters, I have been surprised to notice that there are other things that we, as natives of this country, disregard, yet, they draw foreigners' attention and contribute to the creation of a definite image regarding Romanians and Romania.

The students who have answered the questionnaire come from European countries, such as, Greece, Germany, Macedonia, Poland and Albania, and also from countries on other continents, for instance, Asia (China, Turkmenistan, Turkey), Africa (Morocco, Pakistan and Cameroon) and South America (Costa Rica).

The questionnaire has been applied to a group of one hundred students, aged between 18 and 22, ignoring the margin of error, since our intention has not been to generalize starting from the information but to picture an image of Romania through the eyes of these young people, most of them faced with their first experience of leaving their families to study abroad, even if in such a country as Romania.

The students have answered ten questions, and the results have been the following:

To the question "Has this been your first visit to Romania?", 97% of the subjects gave a positive answer, whereas 3% answered that they had come to Romania on various occasions.

To the question "Why have you chosen to study in Romania?", the answers differed greatly and some were very surprising. As a consequence, the majority of them, about 60% claimed that studying in Romania is cheaper and it is much easier than in their native countries to have access to higher education or the university programmes they prefer; 30%, especially those coming from non-European countries, answered that their purpose has been to be granted a European degree, which will be acknowledged abroad; 2% replied that their choice has been Romania for the quality of the

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education; 4% maintained that they are interested in the Romanian culture and civilization; 3% preferred Romania due to a relative (brothers, cousins or even parents) who studied in Romania and 1% of those questioned did not answer the question.

The goal of the next question was to find out what details are known to foreign students about Romania, before arriving here. The majority of them, almost 70%, argued that they are aware of the fact that Romania lies in Europe, about 10% answered that they knew nothing, and out of the most interesting answers received, we have retained the following: I knew that *it is in Europe and close to Bulgaria and Turkey and that the first language is Romanian and the second English*, replied someone in Morocco; I knew that *the Romanian tomatoes are the best in Europe; Vlad the Impaler did not live in Bran Castle; the most popular writer is Mihai Eminescu; Băsescu worked in Belgium; Bucharest was once called "little Paris"*, wrote a student from Germany; I knew that *it is a country that lies in eastern Europe and that it joined the European Union*, replied a student from Macedonia; *I had heard that people in Romania still travel by carriage, and I was really scared when, leaving the airport, I saw a carriage in the street,* wrote a student from Greece; all the students from Bulgaria answered that they knew that *we are neighbours*; I knew *where Romania is located geographically; about the language that it is the only Latin language, which has preserved the cases and other characteristic of Latin; I knew a few verbs, a few verbs and a little grammar; I knew about Brâncuşi*, wrote a student from Costa Rica; I knew that *Aromanians live here*, answered a student from Macedonia, who was Aromanian himself; I knew that *they had a communist regime*, said a student from Greece; I knew *a few things about the Romanian culture and civilization, about the mentality of Romanians, about their folk customs (especially those in Ardeal), about the Romanian history and geography*, claimed the students from Poland; one of the Polish students argued that on his first visit to Romania he knew about this country, *more things than some of the Romanians themselves may actually know.*

To the question "What was the first thing that attracted your attention when you reached Romania?", the answers were: a lot of dogs, for 60% of the respondents; the beautiful girls (with short dresses) for about 10% of those questioned; the weather and the beautiful countryside landscapes, for 10% out of them; music, for another 10%. The other ten percent counted answers, such as: *the houses are very beautiful; generally*

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speaking, I noticed the dirt and chaos in the big cities, the students that are not careful with the space they live in; the Black Sea and people; the tall buildings, the busy traffic and many people in the street, because we come from a small country (such as, Macedonia)*; the expensive cars in the street; I noticed the Romanian banknotes* (the images on the Romanian banknotes), claimed a student from Serbia; *the friendliness of Romanians when they understand that you are a foreigner, which changes when you address them in their own language and they think you are one of them; I did not notice anything special, everything is as it should be for me* (the student from Poland); *I was surprised by the Romanian language because it is completely different from our own language* (the student from Turkey). These answers must have been in accordance with the cultural level of each individual who enters a new community and therefore becomes the representative of their people.

To the question connected to the friends that these students managed to make in Romania, if they exist and where they are from, all the respondents replied that they have friends, but only 20% mentioned that some of their friends are Romanian. In general, being part of a class of foreign students alone, they tend to make friends among themselves, only the students in the preliminary year, and it is only later that the circle of friends is extended; however, this rarely includes Romanians; sometimes, the situation remains the same for whole duration of their stay in Romania. Thus, this situation demonstrates that the integration of foreign students in the Romanian cultural environment is difficult, and the greatest difficulties are faced by black students.

A bigger chance for an integration in the Romanian background would be offered to the students that live in the university hostel, only that living in separate rooms, they do not mingle with their Romanian colleagues.

To the question "What did you like in Romania?", the majority of the answers, about 80%, opted for the typical Romanian hospitability and friendliness; other responses made reference to Romanian landscapes (with greenery and many trees even in cities), to the medieval towns in Ardeal, to the high quality music, to the very delicious dishes (especially Romanian soup and the grilled minced meat rolls), to the parks and a lake and the architecture of our capital city. Some also appreciated the fact that several languages are spoken in Romania; especially the Turkish students, who are

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not familiar with any other international language, appreciated that fact that they could be understood in their mother tongue in Dobrogea.

The opposite of the previous question, "What did you dislike in Romania?", respectively, revealed the following answers: bureaucracy, you have to wait for a long time to receive the documents necessary for enrolment in the university programme; Bucharest is dirty and crowded; the clerks in the public institutions are often rude; Romanians do not help their elders. Moreover, foreign students disliked stray dogs, Gypsies begging everywhere, the state of the streets when it snows, the very expensive taxies, the hostel that is not kept clean by the students, the bad driving skills of the people in our cities, smoking being allowed everywhere, the lack of stimulation and revaluation of good students, a certain tendency towards mediocrity of Romanians and the big distance at times from their country of origin.

The next item in the questionnaire required students to provide solutions for solving the problems noticed by them. Some gave no valid answer, claiming not to be aware of the proper solutions, other did not write anything, skipping the question, whereas the majority of them wrote that we should build shelters ("houses", according to them) for dogs; that we need to envisage campaigns meant to raise awareness in the population through real legislation and structural reforms necessary for the support of the civil society; that we must fine all those that break the law; people ought to be more educated regarding their coexistence in the society (not to listen to loud music in the public transport, for instance, according to a student from Poland)*;* there should be less students sharing a room in the students' hostel; there should be strict regulations regarding smoking and garbage (mentioned the student from Costa Rica); internet information concerning the schedule of the institutions and the trains timetable should be accurate (suggested a student from Greece); there should be international criteria in the educational system (requested a student from Germany); there should a higher level of security (required some Arab students).

At the end of the questionnaire I asked students to briefly define Romania. Thus, we found out that that Romanians have a different character; they are more talkative than Macedonians and Pakistani, friendlier, more energetic, and less punctual than Germans; conversely, they are lazier and less passionate and enthusiastic than Poles; Romanians love dancing (especially traditional dances, *hora*); Romanians are good people

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who are willing to maintain their customs; some Romanians are extremely rich and live a comfortable life, yet, the majority of the population is very poor and they have to survive somehow; in the streets, there are orphans and children that are victims of their parents' abuses; Romanians are generally cheerful, they dance and enjoy life even if life has been unjust to them; students and young people in general in Romania know a lot more about bars and clubs than the reality they have to face, if compared to the young generation in Costa Rica; Romanians are hospitable but they have a tendency to improvise and postpone everything up to the last moment. Furthermore, through the eyes of foreign students, Romanians like complaining about their sad lot, but they do not do much to change it and are not capable of taking advantage of a chance when that is offered.

About Romania, the overall impression is that it is a country of deep contrasts, with a special charm, with a rich history and interesting people, yet dishonest at times, with a rich culture that is little known in other countries, with a weak governmental system and a lot of problems; Romanian is more modern by comparison with Iraq and less modern if compared to Germany; Romania has traditions, folklore and myths in common with the countries in the Balkan region, such as Bulgaria, Macedonia and Greece (the myth of sacrifice for art, the story of the goat with three, seven, respectively, kids or of the pig with three piglets, the tradition of *mărţişor*, the customs and traditions for Christmas and New Year); Romanian wines are of high quality.

The respondents also mentioned that streets become lakes when it rains; that, though there are garbage bins, people lack the adequate education to use them; the students that come from foreign countries with a warmer climate find it difficult to adapt to the Romanian winter, but the summers compensate for the dissatisfactions of the cold season; public transport is crowded and chaotic, apparently with no timetable.

In conclusion, we could state that the image of Romania and Romanians through the eyes of foreign students is one fraught with contradictions, the Romanian environment being equally appreciated and criticized by those who come to our country, and it is left to us and the future generations to change at least a part of the negative elements that characterize us.

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