

Romanians' Self-Image in the Twentieth Century

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Introduction

WHEN WE speak about the self-image of a person, things are rather clear, as human beings generally know themselves, are aware of their qualities and defects, and act accordingly in their interactions with those around. Some of these attributes are innate, while others are acquired during the lifetime, being thus an internalization of the positive and negative experiences of everyday life. In many instances, however, the self-image of the individual is a resultant of heredity, education and life experience; it can be detected by applying specific questionnaires, corroborated when possible with observations of the person's behavior over a longer period of time. In practical terms, the self-image is a psychological construct by which we relate to reality (our relationships with others).

If the above do not surprise us so much, when it comes to the self-image of an entire nation, composed of individuals totally different in native predispositions, level of education and life experiences, things may not be that clear. However, there is a freestanding discipline called *imagology*, which is an "interdisciplinary science that studies communication through images and the way these images crystallize as part of the individual and the collective spirit depending on the dimensions of interpretation that the human groups offer during their historical development" (Gorun 2007, 21). Likewise, "imagology, working as it does primarily on literary representations, furnished continuous proof that is in the field of imaginary and poetical literature that national stereotypes are first and most effectively formulated, perpetuated and disseminated" (Beller and Leerssen 2007, 26).

The fact that the social organism resembles an individual, having a number of qualities and defects that determine its attitude and behavior, has been known by sages since ancient times. Therefore, we are entitled to engage in this approach to identify the "national specificity" of the Romanian people during a distinct period of time. Our effort is also encouraged by the words of Rădulescu-Motru, a keen observer of the Romanian nation, who in a speech delivered in 1910 stated that "The soul of a nation is not a mere aggregation of spiritual patches, but is itself a unit living by the harmony of its functions, just like the soul of every individual. The soul of our nation was formed as a resultant of the souls of the Romanians who lived and live; it has its own nature that we can explain with the help of the Romanians' souls, but which can not be confused with the nature of any of them" (Rădulescu-Motru 1910, 3-4).

The aim of this study is to identify the self-image of the Romanian people, as it emerges from the main literary writings of the twentieth century, and to compare it with the image profile and the "atomic" image model developed based on the sociological surveys conducted at the end of the century, and especially after 1990. We are aware that the choice of literary texts is extremely important, because literature has much in common with the media, which is "a privileged

genre for the dissemination of stereotypes, because it often works on the presupposition of a ‘suspension of disbelief’ and some (at least aesthetic) appreciative credit among the audience” (Leerssen 2007, 26).

Although the performed analysis is somewhat detached from the historical and social context, we recognize its importance, which was so brilliantly highlighted by Drăghicescu in his work titled “From the Psychology of the Romanian People” (1907). This is encouraging, because by changing the present conditions and through an intense educational effort the Romanian national character can be improved significantly.

Method

IN ORDER to outline the self-image of the Romanian people in the twentieth century we selected the major literary writings with ethnopsychological character and extracted the paragraphs which referred explicitly to the national character of the Romanians. Subsequently, we identified the image indicators and quantified them on a scale with seven rungs (from 1 to 7), having at the ends opposite attributes, as follows:

Kind 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 **Unkind**
Worthy 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 **Unworthy** etc.

We always placed the positive features on the left and the negative ones on the right. The scale rungs have the following meanings:

4 – neutral value;

3 and 5 – values showing that a particular feature (positive or negative) is present to a small extent in the ethnopsychological character of the Romanians;

2 and 6 – values showing that a particular feature is present to a greater extent with the Romanian people, or at least in a higher degree in comparison with other nations;

1 and 7 – values showing that a feature can be found in a very large measure with the Romanian people.

The intensity of the image indicators was assessed for each and every author, as follows:

- when the author largely approaches a particular indicator, offering examples and arguments to support his assertions, or when he mentions several times, even in passing, a quality or a defect (which suggests his concern for the respective topic), the indicator’s intensity is considered high (1 or 7);
- the mere reference to a positive or negative feature, without any other explanation or without arguments in favor of that element, suggests a minimum intensity (3 or 5);
- when in the same paragraph the positive trait is criticized or the negative one is justified from certain points of view, the indicator’s intensity is deemed to be medium (2 or 6);
- when several paragraphs referring to the same ethnopsychological feature are identified, the indicator’s intensity is taken as a resultant of the respective literary passages.

Based on the selected texts, we developed the image profile of the Romanian people for each and every author. Then, by using the identified image indicators, we were able to come up with a synthesis of the Romanians’ image in the twentieth century, which was expressed both as an “atomic” image model and as an image profile. Subsequently, we proceeded to identify the Romanians’ self-image according to several observations and research studies undertaken towards the end of the twentieth century. All these results will be shown in the following.

Results and Discussion

OUR IMAGOLOGICAL approach relies on several literary writings of reference for the issue at stake, namely:

- Dumitru Drăghicescu (1907) – *Din psihologia poporului român* (From the psychology of the Romanian people)
- Constantin Rădulescu-Motru (1910) – *Sufletul neamului nostru. Calități bune și defecte* (The soul of our nation. Good qualities and flaws)
- Mihai Ralea (1927) – *Fenomenul românesc* (The Romanian phenomenon) (reprinted in 1997)
- Lucian Blaga (1936) – *Spațiul mioritic* (The Romanian space)
- Ion Simionescu (1937) – *Țara noastră* (Our country)
- Nicolae Porsenna (1937) – *Regenerarea neamului românesc* (The regeneration of the Romanian nation)
- Emil Cioran (1939) – *Schimbară la față a României* (The transfiguration of Romania)
- Constantin Rădulescu-Motru (1939) – *Românismul, catehismul unei noi spiritualități* (The Romanian character, the catechism of a new spirituality)
- Mehedinți Simion (1940) – *Creștinismul românesc. Adăos la caracterizarea etnografică a poporului român* (Romanian Christianity. An addition to the ethnographic characterization of the Romanian people (republished in 1995)
- George Călinescu (1941) – *Istoria literaturii române, de la origini până în prezent* (The history of Romanian literature, from its origins to the present day)
- Mircea Vulcănescu (1943) – *Dimensiunea românească a existenței* (The Romanian dimension of existence)
- Sorin Mitu (1997) – *Geneza identității naționale la românii ardeleni* (The emergence of the national identity with the Transylvanian Romanians)

To underline the attention that each of the aforementioned authors showed towards the ethnopsychological characteristics of the Romanian people, but also to illustrate how we identified the image indicators (positive and negative), we consider that it is not without interest to reproduce below sets of two passages from several of the works taken into account:

“What distinguishes however the Romanians, not only from the nations in Eastern Europe among which they live but, we may say, among all the nations, is the *liveliness and wit of their spirit*, is the sparkle of a *fine and distinguished intelligence*, portrayed as a *modest, timid appearance*, and in relation with the strangers *shy to humiliation* (...)” (Drăghicescu 1907, 527).

“The same historical events are also responsible for their *haste and superficiality, lack of foresight and discipline*. Not comfortable with long tensions, with continuous exertions, almost nothing is thoroughly made around here” (Drăghicescu 1907, 487).

“The Romanian is *passionate about politics*. For him politics is like a magic wand with which everything can be changed” (Rădulescu-Motru 1910, 12).

“When a Romanian is *in doubt*, be sure this is not because he has a personal conviction to defend, but because he *doesn't know yet whose side to take*” (Rădulescu-Motru 1910, 7).

“Another general feature, belonging to the common heritage of the Romanian nation, is the *deep love, difficult to uproot, for the land* the Romanian is tied to, not only through his ancestors but also because of his daily bread (...) (Simionescu 1937, 276).”

“Without literacy, what he produced is full of wisdom and providence” (Simionescu 1937, 277).

“The Romanian nation is the *wisest* in Europe; not on account of wit, but from a lack of courage and affirmation (...) (Cioran 1939, 42).”

“The Romanian nation never lived under the sign of the Gothic spirit. Hence: *passivity, skepticism, self-contempt, gentle contemplation, minor religiosity, exclusion from history, wisdom*, which outline the negative aspect of our national specificity, an aspect unfortunately central (...)” (Cioran 1939, 42).

“So, *reserve, discretion, moderation* (...). This is the psychological and ethical background of the Carpathian nation” (Mehedinți 1940, 87).

“Of course, the Romanian nation has *shortcomings*, like any other nation. *It is far from considering itself to be holy...*” (Mehedinți 1940, 82).

From the excerpts presented so far, as well as from the others we found in the pages of the investigated literary works, we extracted a number of image indicators, which were subsequently expressed in a concise form. These will be shown hereinafter accompanied in brackets by the number of writings in which they appear. We should note that if a certain indicator was found only in the work of a single author, it was not considered for this study. Therefore, the list of image indicators contains the following items: resigned, lacks willpower (8); wise (4); intelligent (4); kind (4); passive, apathetic (4); lacks initiative (4); superficial (4); superstitious (4); imaginative (3); tolerant (3); hospitable (3); adaptable (3); devout (3); inconsistent (3); lacks pride (2); unruly (2); brave (2); and generous (2). Based on this distribution we came up with the “atomic” self-image of the Romanians in the twentieth century (Fig. 1). One can note that the image nucleus comprises two negative features, namely resignation and lack of willpower. If we take into account that these two attributes are indicative of a deficit of mental energy, we are entitled to add to them others of the same type, such as passiveness, lack of initiative and inconsistency. This leads us to the conclusion that the core of the Romanians’ self-image, as results from the writings of the twentieth century, is profoundly negative. A resigned, apathetic and inconsistent nation, lacking willpower and initiative, can hardly play an important part on the stage of history, a fact confirmed by the socio-economic situation of Romania during the last century. The problem is extremely serious, because the elements that make up the image nucleus are the most stable, and therefore hard to change. On the other hand, the peripheral elements, although significant, are more flexible, performing a function meant to “adjust and adapt the central system to the concrete constraints and situations” (Neculau 1996, 42). Therefore, these can be modified more easily, either strengthened or weakened.

As far as the image profile (Fig. 2) is concerned (determined starting from the intensity of the selected indicators), we can argue that it is rather balanced according to the cumulated intensity of the positive indicators, on the one hand, and the negative ones, on the other hand. This is not in contradiction with the “atomic” image model, since the graph does not evaluate the frequency of occurrence of every indicator, but only the importance that various authors attach to them in their writings.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, the researchers paid greater attention to the Romanians’ self-image, trying to determine scientifically, through sociological surveys and systematic observations, the ethnopsychological characteristics of the nation. Thus, in 1988, Septimiu Chelcea published a study titled “The Romanians’ self-image,” in which he presented the results of a sociological survey aiming at identifying the moral qualities of the Romanians. The subjects were required

to write down three qualities of the Romanian people in descending order of importance. Because of the specific constraints of the communist period, the author avoided to ask questions about the nation's defects. Even so, the results were quite interesting. After processing the questionnaires the author found a large number of attributes, the percentage of which varied from 0.59% (civilized) to 21.18% (diligent), which entitled him to consider that at that moment the Romanians' self-image was not well defined, as it was lacking a nucleus, having only peripheral elements. Two conclusions may be drawn from this survey: either the Romanians' self-image before the anti-communist revolution of 1989 was very faded, or it consisted mainly of negative elements. In our view, the latter conclusion is strongly supported by the "atomic" image model shown in Fig. 2. More than that, this opinion is also supported by the study conducted in 1995 by Alina Mungiu and titled "The Romanians after '89. The history of a misunderstanding." The work presents the author's personal observations and the results obtained in a number of focus groups, outlining a profoundly negative image, the profile of which is shown in Fig. 3.

In 1997, Puiu Ilie Vasilescu published the results of a study conducted under the auspices of the Institute of Psychology of the Romanian Academy, "Romanians about themselves. Field study." He indicated that on the basis of a personality test he evaluated five psychological factors called styles: expressive style, interpersonal style, work style, emotional style, and intellectual style. The author came up with a "real" self-image, which represented the average scores between how the subject saw himself and how he thought the others saw him. Thus, he was able to draw some interesting conclusions:

- in terms of expressive style, the Romanians all over the country are open, communicative and energetic;
- in terms of interpersonal style, they are "warm and sympathetic, attentive and delicate";
- in terms of work style, they are efficient and responsible persons, who use to carry through the things they undertake. They have expressed the desire to be more efficient in their activities;
- in terms of emotional style, they are subjected to a certain stress;
- the intellectual style indicates people fairly open to new ideas and experiences.

This study highlights an important thing. More often than not, individuals have a positive image of themselves, but when it comes to other people or to how they perceive the nation as a whole, they become stingier in laudatory appreciations. Therefore, there is a discrepancy between the self-image of each individual, rather positive most of the times, and the image of the Romanians in general, which unfortunately is much gloomier. It follows that the self-image of a nation is not a simple aggregation of personal images, but it derives from the collective behavior manifested in various instances and moments of existence.

In order to see if the image of the previous generations is shared by the young people at the end of the twentieth century, we engaged in 1998 in a study similar to that undertaken by Chelcea (1988), having as subjects 82 students of the Faculty of Geography within Bucharest University. All these people were asked to mention three qualities and three defects specific for the Romanian people. Thus, we were able to make up a list of 19 image indicators and we computed the percentage of students who had mentioned them. Based on these indicators, we prepared an "atomic" image model, having as its nucleus two positive qualities, hospitality (61%) and intelligence (41%), and a negative one, represented by dishonesty (39%) (Fig. 4). As far as the peripheral elements are concerned, they unfortunately abound in negative attributes (gullible, passive, uncivilized, sloppy, lazy, selfish, unreliable, cowardly, envious, divided), which can be explained by the difficult socio-political situation at the beginning of the post-communist period. It would seem therefore that towards the end of the twentieth century the self-image of the Romanian people begins to improve,

but without changing significantly, so as to encourage the progress of the nation. Besides, the hospitality that is present in the image core is an indifferent quality for the economic and social progress, while intelligence, in the absence of favorable conditions of life, can easily degenerate into cunning.

A confirmation of these considerations comes from the study conducted by Data Media in 1997 titled “How are the Romanians – Opinions of German journalists”:

“The Romanian is **largely** *generous, proud, civilized, modest, optimistic, tolerant and educated*; he is **quite** *versatile, active and serious*, and **to a lesser extent** *effective, honest and creative*. **Also to a small extent** the Romanian is *dependent, inefficient, lazy and undisciplined, violates laws and rules* in general.”

One can note again that from the point of view of the development of the Romanian society the positive qualities cannot balance the negative ones, even though in the mind of the German journalists these are present only to a small extent.

Conclusions

ALTHOUGH IMAGOLGY and the self-image of a nation have received heavy criticism, it is almost impossible to reject outright the existence of national characters and ethnic images. As a matter of fact, political science admits that people’s decisions, choices, commitments in political life are not reduced only to logical-mathematical reasons. These individuals cannot be regarded as neutral entities, lacking personality and feelings, but it must be accepted that all of them act in accordance with the past beliefs, memories, idealized anticipations, and fictional images (Gorun 2007, 23).

The self-image is the result of individual experiences, education and media influence. It is a subjective perception of a reality that is often totally different; consequently, efforts should be made in order to adjust this image accordingly. That such a struggle will not be futile also results from the words of Dumitru Drăghicescu: “It is known from Socrates how valuable self-knowledge is. Self-consciousness and the precise self-knowledge, as they develop, become the most powerful means of struggle and success in the fight for life of people and nations. It is not enough to be strong, to have superior spiritual qualities. If you don’t have a clear awareness of the strengths and qualities you possess, it’s almost as if they were not there. Not knowing how much you can, you will undertake only things that are either above or below your powers. The people and the nations who do not have a good knowledge of themselves and think they are less valuable than they really are, remain and become weak. It is equally dangerous if you exaggerate or underestimate your own power” (Drăghicescu 1910, 20).

Given all the considerations examined so far, we have grouped the image indicators resulted from this study into several categories, depending on how they influence social progress, as follows:

- I. *Features extremely important for economic and social progress*: intelligence, imagination, adaptability, creativity;
- II. *Features that support progress*: optimism, patience, tolerance, sociability, wisdom;
- III. *Features that are neutral with respect to progress*: kindness, generosity, hospitality, sense of humor, religiosity;



FIG. 1. Romanians' self-image in the twentieth century

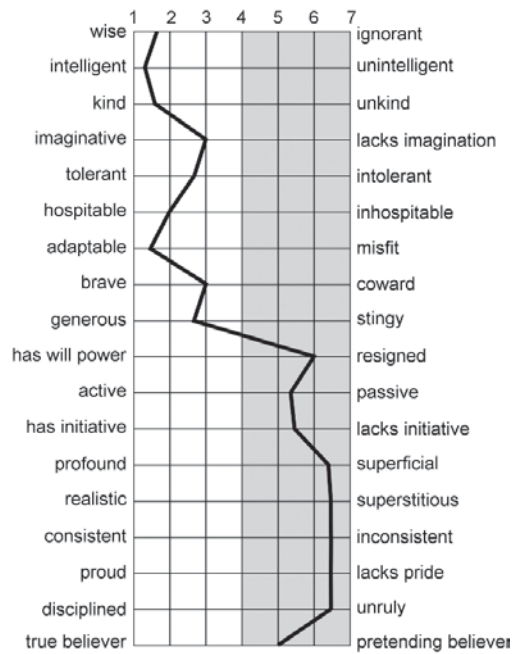


FIG. 2. The profile of the Romanians' self-image in the twentieth century

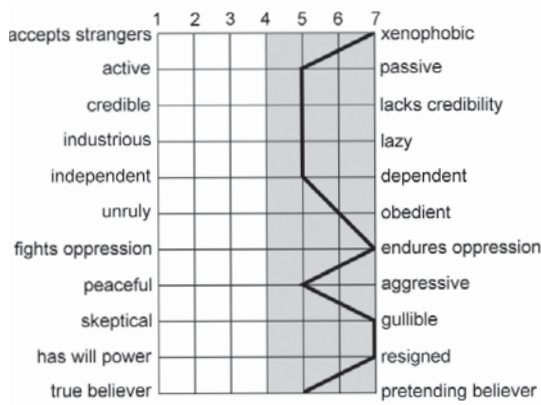


FIG. 3. The profile of the Romanians' self-image at Alina Mungiu

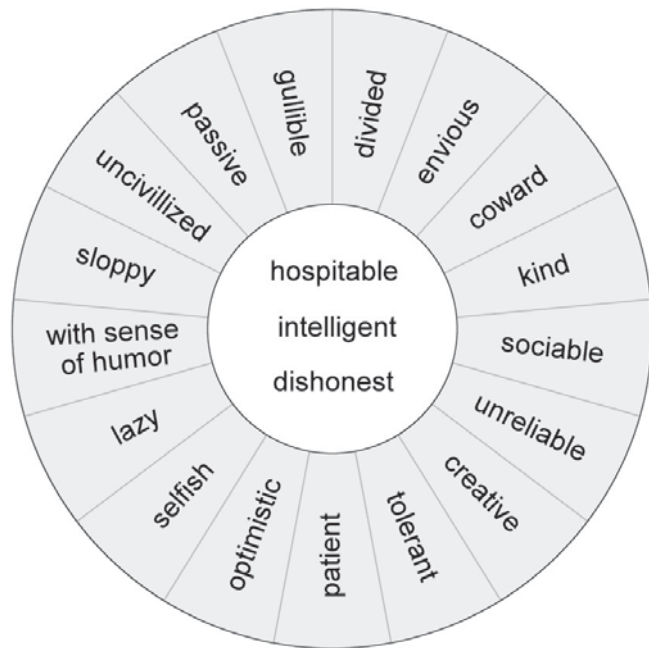


FIG. 4. Romanians' self-image according to a group of students in Geography

IV. *Features that hinder progress*: lack of willpower, resignation, passivity, apathy, lack of initiative, superficiality, indifference, laziness, indiscipline, frivolity, credulity, dishonesty, inefficiency, breach of covenant, failure to comply with laws and regulations

One can easily note that the four qualities specific for economic and social progress are strongly undermined by the 13 negative features of the Romanian ethnopsychological character. If future studies will prove that these negative traits of the national personality remain present, the Romanian society will have to take resolute actions in order to diminish them, if not to remove them completely. In our opinion, education, justice and the media will have an essential role in this respect. □

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Abstract

Romanians' Self-Image In The Twentieth Century

This study seeks to emphasize the self-image of the Romanian people, as it emerges from the literary writings of the twentieth century and from the sociological surveys undertaken towards the end of this period. It starts from the premise that every social group, far from being just a simple assemblage of individuals, makes up a living organism with specific ethnopsychological features. The image analysis was accomplished based on a number of indicators selected from the literary texts and sociological surveys, which were quantified from the points of view of their frequency of occurrence and intensity. Thus, we were able to draw image models and profiles that helped us shape the particular ethnic personality of the Romanian people. Although during the twentieth century virulent criticism was launched against the existence of such a national character, consisting of qualities and defects, the authors believe that despite some inherent subjectivity the self-image of a nation contains many elements of truth. We are therefore entitled to such a scientific approach, because self-knowledge is a sine qua non condition for the progress of individuals and nations. If over the centuries the Romanians have been kind, tolerant and generous, it is no less true that the tumultuous history of these lands has left deep scars in their souls, which by no means can be a matter of pride. This is why we believe that the self-image of the Romanian people today inherits many elements from the twentieth century and thus requires some kind of improvement.

Keywords

image, image indicators, qualities, defects