ŞTEFAN BORBÉLY

The Diffuse Romanian Identity on the Internet

I fear the moment when this estranged army decides to return home.

Ştefan Borbély
Professor of comparative literature at the Faculty of Letters, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, essayist and translator. Author, among other titles, of the volumes **De la Herakles la Eulenspiegel** (From Herakles to Eulenspiegel) (2001), **Proza fantastică a lui Mircea Eliade: Complexul gnostic** (The fantastic fiction of Mircea Eliade: The Gnostic complex) (2003).

F ROM A methodological point of view, some preliminary observations are needed before we can proceed with the analysis of the Romanian identity discourse present on the Internet. The period between 2004 and 2008 was selected for our investigation because it somewhat coincides with a peak in the large-scale use of the Internet in Romania. On the other hand, the same period is defined by two major events: the elections of 2004 and Romania's accession to the EU, in early 2007. Both events triggered endless comments in the alternative diffuse medium of the Internet. It is also true that the analysis of such a field—or rather of the manner in which Romania, the Romanian condition, and Romanians themselves are presented in the informal exchange of messages on the Internet—is a major scientific gamble, with randomness often abusively presented as a significant phenomenon. This largely has to do with the fact that the identity and the professional background of users remains hidden, just like their political or ideological background. Also, as there is fairly little we know even when it comes to the users' age bracket—but we

can assume it is somewhere between 15 and 45 years of age, as average figures usually indicate, with what may be a higher presence of users aged between 20 and 30—, we can conclude that such elements could easily lead us to the point where we might extrapolate and ascribe a representative character to isolated opinions and positions. It is equally possible to overlook representative, essential and atypical interventions.

Despite all these professional risks, we nevertheless decided to comprehensively access the Internet and see how Romanians define themselves within an anonymity that is deliberately subversive but ultimately ineffective and harmless, intended first and foremost to provide an alternative discourse, apparently free (only apparently, given the tremendous pressure exerted by clichés and stereotypes), to everything that happens in the country. The concept of "subversive anonymity" does require an explanation, which is not a difficult challenge if we think of the other methodological risks that we have accepted. Essentially, Internet users resort to forums and to blogs as compensatory forms of public intervention, being nearly unanimously convinced of the fact that the Romanian public space—political life, the press, the TV stations, education—has been "invaded" by an official discourse that fails to represent them.

A first conclusion thus emerges: in the sense of a dominant participative and civic dimension, Internet users suggest that there is a continuity between Ceauşescu's totalitarianism of yesteryear and the arbitrary and chaotic "totalitarianism" that ensued after 1990, when some indoctrination reflexes continued to remain present, especially in the field of education. According to this belief, the deep structures of society—obedience, lack of civic courage, the absence of an ideological and political alternative, stupidity derived from deliberately inoculated ignorance—failed to experience radical changes during the transition from totalitarianism to the current anarchic freedom. In the eyes of the Internauts, Romanian society responded to the new political and ideological stimulus with its typical atemporal and passive fatalism, derived from fatalistic cultural and psychological categories that unavoidably lead us to the a priori renunciation found in the national ballad *Miorița*. Consequently, the first identity-defining aspect denounced by Internauts has to do with the inertial character of our country, inhabited by a useless, hesitant and conformist people. These features are seen as dictated by fate and therefore eternal, immune to the effects of the country's accession to the EU and to the more pragmatic approach required by this new affiliation.

The anonymous postings on the Internet unavoidably feature a large number of stereotypes, most frequent being that of the ancestral obedience shown by Romanians. Also condemned are the fact that the country's assets were sold for practically nothing, the electoral apathy that led to the emergence of a

greedy and profiteering political class, the excessive tolerance towards Gypsies (and, strictly in institutional terms, towards the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania), the inertia of the justice system and the lack of efficiency displayed by law enforcement agencies. In what concerns the latter aspect, the most frequent target of accusations is the police, always willing to protect evildoers and in constantly cahoots with the members of the underworld. We are not dealing here with identity-related issues, but rather with despicable facts of life. At their core, however, we find a motivational drive that deserves some attention, as it involves an association between wealth and crime. Many of the texts posted on the Internet argue that crime has become so widespread that it currently ignores all common sense and enjoys total impunity, operating like a mechanism for social success that everyone is ready to try out, if given the opportunity. Gender divisions are most illustrative in this case: women—usually young women—speak against dirty money, while men seem fascinated by it. The latter also believe that the widespread nature of crime has changed its status from a trespass that required punishment to a behavioral norm which is, if not desirable, than at least tolerable.

The moment of Romania's accession to the EU (January 1, 2007) was marked by a large number of postings on the Internet. Most of the anonymous users believed that a major geo-strategic concession had been made to our country, as Romania's economy and its moral readiness to join the greater "European family" in no way justified the accession. The best methodological analogy likely to justify such an opinion comes from the political jokes circulating prior to 1989 and in which we find a diffuse identity discourse of wide popular resonance. Thus, in these jokes, whenever Romanians compared themselves to other peoples or nations (most frequently to the Germans, the Hungarians, and the Jews, in whose proximity Romanian identity took shape over the centuries), they postulated a paradoxical national superiority, stemming from their cunning, from their duplicitous nature, and from their versatile psychology. Generally speaking, the Internet discussions around Romania's accession to the EU extrapolate on the same identity-related mechanism, grounded in the awareness of an openly acknowledged structural inferiority: Romania has "tricked" Europe and fraudulently gained accession to it, and our only chance was to remain somewhere on the fringes of the system, seeking to draw maximum profit from this skillful collective pragmatics, duplicitously set in a strategic position.

We have uncovered here two fundamental identity-related aspects manifest on the Internet and which are grounded in the same logic of an adaptive, retractile psychology. First comes the idea of our structural inferiority, combined with that of our historical handicap: living on the fringes of history, in a country always coveted and threatened by the great powers (the most blatant stereo-

type circulated by our history textbooks), in the course of time Romanians devised a most adequate psychological reaction mechanism, derived precisely from their inferior status. There is only one step between inferiority and adaptive mortification: Romanians displayed such an attitude during the communist period, whose hardships left them practically unscathed—in fact, nothing could be farther from the truth—, because a people that expects little from life is always ready to put up with any atrocity, including the political ones.

The second element is more subtle and complex, questioning one of the sacred coordinates of the Romanian national mentality, namely, the protection offered to Romanians by their "mother country," all-too-generous with its honest and pure-blooded sons but hostile and fickle in its relations with foreigners. As we know, within the paradigmatic Romanian identity, the myth of the "mother country" was always associated with the protective organicism of nature, leading us once again to the widespread extrapolation of a retractile psychological and volitional complex, based on the instinctive flight from danger and on the protection offered by the willingness to expect little from history and from life. It should be said here that the new social realities of post-1989 Romania considerably undermined the myth of the protective and loving "mother country," traditionally and rightfully associated with the psycho-historical myth of the "nurturing placenta": a good mother shares the food equally among all of its progeny, ensuring a decent and moderately comfortable living. From this point of view, however, in the atmosphere of freedom brought by the Revolution of December 1989, the strongest blow to the Romanian sense of identity was dealt by the thousands of fellow citizens who left the country legally or illegally and sought employment abroad. As we know, most of them currently work in humble conditions, doing lowly jobs that they would have never taken in their home country, jobs beneath the symbolic prestige level associated with a decent existence. The psychological and discursive adaptation to this new reality is the main identity-related challenge we can currently find on the Internet. Before dealing with it, we shall review two previous stereotypes without which the present shift would be very difficult to understand.

The Internet does not have a long history in Romania, it is available almost exclusively in the urban areas (few villages are connected to it), there can be no talk about its widespread presence yet, at a time when even some professors—college professors, even…—see the Internet as the work of Satan and the harbinger of doom for books. However, we can tentatively identify three coherent stages in the on-line statement of Romanian identity, the latter being the most interesting for the purposes of the present study. The first stage is one of pride, related to the blood spilled during the Revolution of December 1989: as opposed to the other revolutionaries in Central and Eastern Europe—claims this

type of discourse—, Romanians gained an unavoidable superiority because of the lives sacrificed on that occasion. Within this identity discourse, Europe is featured as the evil component of the dichotomy, because it was unable to acknowledge this honest, suicidal euphoria, comparable to the romantic heroism circulated by school textbooks, debasing it to the level of a simple political scenario orchestrated by Ion Iliescu, Petre Roman, and their henchmen. We do not intend to explore in detail this particular discourse, but we have to say that its dominant symbols, as well as the psychological load associated with it, rely on the projection of a regressive, infantile mental structure: Romania is the "child" of the Revolution—the "Gavroche of Bucharest," photographed next to the torn tricolor, is one of its recurrent symbols—not recognized as such by the "adults," this stereotypical victimization unavoidably leading us to the second identity stage: the stage of the abandoned infant (its recurrent symbol are the street urchins), which comes into play once the illusion of pride begins to subside.

Unlike in the case of the first image, the extrapolation of this second identity discourse is fundamentally a political one: caught between an ungrateful West and a Romania unable to provide a decent life to all of its sons, in a necessary and peremptory manner the discourse identifies the culprits (Western politicians and journalists, and the greedy Romanian political class, respectively), implicitly seeking to exonerate the naïve masses. This is the stage where the ontological dichotomy between "being" and "fate," extremely present in the paradigmatic projection of the Romanian identity, surfaces in the most acute fashion: the Romanian people, repository of the "national being," is essentially good, eminently pure, and generous to the extreme, capable of radical sacrifices (with the Revolution a good example in this respect…), and everything would work perfectly were it not for the profiteers who manipulate it.

THE DISTINCTION between ontological and phenomenal is the most acute one in the discourse related to the Romanian identity, regardless of timeframe or context: it unavoidably resurfaced in the context of a relative psychological calm, when the "fate" of the community was determined by a chronological factor, related to the phenomenological succession of moments, namely, by subsistence. Dominant in the current Internet discourse concerning the Romanian identity is the economic aspect: one would expect to find psychology, but in fact there is very little of it; one would expect to find nationalism, but even in this case the references are vague and not enough to shape a defining identity ideology. On the other hand, the ambiguities of the new identity discourse cannot be avoided when performing an objective and unbiased analysis, as it is most disconcerting to define a people, nearly 20 years after it gained its political freedom, chiefly in terms of destitution. Once again, mini-

mal social expectations are the norm: people must not desire too much, lest they should be punished; a good Christian is humble, patient, and keeps his head down (and the list goes on…).

We come thus to the third stage in the aforementioned progression of identity, the stage of a pragmatic, lucrative brotherhood, typical for the mature orphan who left his home seeking to improve his lot. The trauma caused by the departure from home is conspicuously absent, despite the best efforts in this respect made by the domestic press which, for instance, reserves a column for the messages of family love sent to those who are "away," or by the sentimental Western Union ads, a phenomenon which, for that matter, might deserve a more detailed analysis.

The new identity discourse rules out the image of the protective mother country. This is undoubtedly a historic first for the national paradigm of self-definition: of course, nostalgia can be felt with Internet users, sentimentalism is also present at times, but this is probably the first time in many, many years that Romanians try to define themselves outside the haven represented by the home country. We know that a constant feature of the historiography of national identity circulating during the totalitarian period was the postulate of a fundamentally defensive attitude towards the hostile neighboring countries, as indicated by the doctrine of the exclusively defensive wars fought by the ancestors of the Romanians, until the time of Ion Antonescu. Still, in the new economic context, the mere postulate of "hostile foreigners" is absent on the Internet, although the administrative anomalies found in the countries of adoption—mostly when it comes to consular restrictions—are quickly pointed out. Autochtonist nationalism—as professed by Vatra Românească, the Greater Romania Party, or politician Gheorghe Funar—is no longer popular on the Internet (despite the presence of websites designed to channel collective ethnic hatred), and the decrease in the public impact of Romanian nationalism—even in Transylvania…—was caused not only by Romania's accession to the EU (completely eradicating nationalism would have set us against the dominant European trend, or this is a level of maturity we have yet to reach…), but mostly by the new tactics of economic survival employed by Romanians beyond the borders of their country.

The best phrase we could use in order to define the new diffuse identity discourse present on the Internet is that of national pride deprived of nationalism, generating a significant and defining aspect: the new Romanian identity discourse, as it currently appears on the Internet, is a dominantly positive, energetic, affirmative one. Gone is the ancestral inferiority complex, and the same could be said about the paralyzing sense of an aboulic identity, typical for the second of the three aforementioned stages, the stage of the "abandoned child." Instead, in the construction of identity we find the expression of an affirmative

collective pride, centered on the rejection of the general and abusive identification of all Romanians with the Roma and of the idea that the few criminals are exemplary for the entire community of Romanian immigrants (legal or illegal). The new stereotypical formula involves the programmatic and obviously preemptive (in the sense that it is mainly directed at the countries of adoption) projection of the "good Romanian," loyal and industrious, achieved through the statement of a sharp contrast with the parasitic members of society (thieves, criminals, Gypsies). The paradox of self-definition by separation from that which is gregarious and base continues to operate in the new context, the mechanism of low social expectations being extremely resilient: identity is not defined by ideals, by high, exponential spiritual values, but rather by the separation from that which is subhuman, "non-Romanian," degrading. It must be said, however, that this type of discourse is essentially aimed at the mechanisms generating social tolerance in the countries of adoption; the home country plays no part here, with all of its hesitations and suicidal inertia.

Still, this discourse makes no reference to the quality of labor. For decades, in Romania the artificial identity-shaping function of the workplace—which was nevertheless defining for one's social status—came to replace personal identity (the observation only applies to the distorted identities shaped by communism). This function has presently ceased to operate and is completely irrelevant. However, its absence is clearly not a positive sign, as the reasons behind the concealment of one's professional identity are largely associated with a protective discretion generated by the shame of working in humble conditions, unacceptable in one's country of origin. Also, most of the Romanian Internet users who live far from their home country show little interest in the public destiny of the country and in its political future. Thus, for many Romanians, the process of self-definition, far from the country they customarily obsessed about and which they turned into fatality, seems to shape a new identity paradigm. It is, however, to early to say for how long it will last, as it is almost exclusively dependent upon unpredictable economic developments. Let us return, however, to our own fears: I fear the moment when this estranged army decides to return home, because the only ideology likely to conceal their failure will be nationalism…

❑

Abstract
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Despite the considerable risks inherent to such an endeavor, given the sheer size and the complex nature of the investigated medium, the study proceeds to analyze the manner in which the identity-related postings made by Romanian Internet users reflect the gradual changes in the stereotypical representations that Romanians project about themselves. Thus, after the investigation of some conventional Romanian stereotypes, three stages are identified—pride in the sacrifices of the Revolution, the abandoned child, and the mature orphan braving the perils of the wide world—more attention being given to the latter, which the author associates with a significant shift of paradigm. For the first time, Romanians define themselves in a manner that disregards the home country and is conditioned largely by economic factors.

Keywords
identity discourse, stereotypes, Internet users, identity paradigm