

An Inquiry into Popular Perceptions of the Centenary and of the Great Union As Expressed in the Social Media

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SOURCE: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCJqbuoVIEmJhQ-Hr-uJOHdA>.

OVER THE past five years, we have witnessed a great number of events commemorating the Centenary of the First World War and the of Great Union of 1918: festivities, parades, concerts, conferences, dedicated websites, films, books, etc. These were considered moments of reflection, an opportunity to reassess the discourse about the past, to reaffirm the collective identity and to strengthen social ties.¹

In Romania, the Centenary has brought to the public awareness, more than ever, the Great War and the Union of 1918. However, the impact of the commemorative events on public opinion seems to have been fairly limited.

Several media channels have documented the weak participation of the population in this celebration. An inquiry by the journalist George Damian on the blog <https://historice.ro/> sought to find out the answer to the question “How do you explain the lack of enthusiasm, the lack of participation of the people in the 100-year

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anniversary of Romania?” The question was addressed to 32 historians active in the online environment. Summarized, the answers were as follows: the public entities were more concerned with political confrontations than with commemoration; the main political institutions promoted the Centenary quite reservedly, in order not to stir up controversy with neighboring countries on sensitive issues; the historians have failed to act coherently in promoting a public debate on these events; the media outlets were interested in various scandals rather than in culture.²

In 2018, the communication audit and strategic marketing house Fugașin & Partners analyzed the internet searches regarding the Centenary and the Great Union, considered relevant because Romania has approx. 11,000,000 internet users. On average, there were 37,560 searches per month on these topics, of which: 30,530 on the Great Union only and 5,820 on the Centenary only; of these, 1,320 were school-related (exams, homework, essays, etc.). The most frequent questions were “When did the Great Union take place?” (1 out of 50), “Who made the Union?” (1 out of 25), “What is the significance of 1 December?” (1 out of 25); 1 in 300 Romanians asked how many years there are in a Centenary.³

The activity on the internet and the social networks is a good indicator of people’s views on these events. In recent years, the history-related internet content created by non-specialists has become more popular than the output of professional historians.⁴ The present paper aims to analyze the popular opinions on Centenary and the Great Union expressed in social media. For this purpose, I have analyzed the comments posted on YouTube to videos on these topics.

I have selected 43 videos, according to the following criteria: they refer to the First World War and/or the Great Union; they have been uploaded on YouTube in the past five years; they have over 30,000 views; they have at least 20 comments (most have over 100, some even over 1,000). Generally, the user profiles did not give indications about age, profession or education. A few of them explicitly mention their age, or the student status; one can safely say, though, that the authors of these comments come from most age groups—from teenagers to older people. As for education, there is no other indication than the quality of the comments: these range from complex, neatly written, with no spelling or grammatical errors, to rudimentary and badly spelled ones. There are also insulting, vulgar comments, especially to videos on sensitive topics (such as the relations between Romanians and Hungarians, which have been tense for hundreds of years because of the status of Transylvania). The videos uploaded by public institutions have far fewer views and comments than those posted by private entities.

The Department of National Identity was established within the Government of Romania with the sole purpose of managing the Centenary events, as described on its webpage:

*Created and entitled to coordinate a large number of events and initiatives dedicated to the celebration of the Centenary of the Great Union of all Romanians, the Department of National Identity ensures centralization, evaluation and financing of projects submitted by central and local authorities and institutions throughout the country, but also by foundations, associations and other citizens' initiatives, so that the great celebration of Romania will be that of all Romanians.*⁵

However, its YouTube channel has only 87 subscribers, and the few uploaded videos have between several dozen and 5,000 views.⁶

The Romanian public television also uploaded a hundred videos dedicated to the Centenary, “Greater Romania—the First Centenary: 5 Minutes of History.” However, these have accumulated only 47,730 views, although its YouTube channel has 717,000 subscribers.⁷

The following channels are among those with the most views:

- “Zaiafet”⁸ (an old Romanian word meaning “party”)—596,000 subscribers; its historical-themed videos each have tens of thousands of views. The owner is Horia Sârghi, a former wedding photographer; although he is not a professional historian, his videos are especially successful among students.
- Cristian Dascălu⁹—159,000 subscribers; the owner is not an historian, but an IT freelancer and freelancing advisor. One of its videos, “Istoria României în 10 minute (La Mulți Ani!)” (The history of Romania in 10 minutes—Happy birthday!), posted on November 2018, gathered 187,683 views.¹⁰
- “Istorie pe șleau”¹¹ (approx. “Straightforward history”)—35,000 subscribers; it is owned by Vlad Pașca, independent historian, and each of its videos has more than 50,000 views.
- Virgil Ciulin¹²—24,700 subscribers; the owner is an economist with a passion for history, and his videos are very popular among students.

I have analyzed the comments to the 43 videos mentioned above, in order to identify the prevalent attitudes, ideas, and views on the Centenary and the Great Union. They address, for the most part, a few key issues.

“Hail to the Heroes”

ONE OF the most important reactions elicited by these videos is the respect for the heroism of the Romanian soldiers who fought in a war of vital importance. Hundreds of users have expressed admiration for them and have felt the need to pay them tribute, even if a hundred years have passed since those events; they feel they have a debt of gratitude to those who fought in the Great War, because they made possible the Great Union, and

subsequently present-day Romania. The tone and content of such reactions may be illustrated by comments such as: “Hail to Our Heroes! Thanks to them, we exist today!”;¹³ “Respect for those who fought for Romania!”;¹⁴ “Our brave heroes. They fought and died for this land. Respect”;¹⁵ “Respect for those who lost their lives for the Romanian people!”; “We thank these heroes for fighting for the Romanian people.”¹⁶

The victories on the battlefield are seen as a reason for pride and honor at belonging to the Romanian nation, accompanied, sometimes, by the idea that the Romanians of today are less worthy than their forefathers, that especially the leaders are not fit to take care of the legacy left by the generation that made the union; even worse, they proved themselves ready to betray the national interest, the common good, for personal gain (“Our brothers have shed so much blood for the Romanian land and now these bastards want to sell it!”; “A lot of people have died for this country to be free, and now they [the leaders] want to sell it. They [the men who have died] are the true heroes!”¹⁷).

Many users expressed feelings of patriotism and the readiness to fight for the motherland, to defend it from enemies, despite the fact that Romania is not currently involved in any armed conflict (“The Romanian land is our homeland and we will defend it”;¹⁸ “I swear to defend my country! Long live Romania!”; “Rise up, Romanian men, defend your land, your mothers, wives and children, who are the future of Romania!”¹⁹). None of these comments provide any indication about the identity of the enemy against which the people are called upon to fight.

The references to what a war entails, beyond the heroism of victories won on the battlefield, are surprisingly few. Only a small part of the comments point out the daily horrors of the great conflagration: a poorly equipped army, death, fear, disease, famine, tens of thousands of civilians forced to leave their homes and seek refuge, hardships. Only a few users object to those who glorify the battles, stressing that “The war is glorious in books and movies. In reality . . . not so much. And by the way: during a war, civilians suffer the most, because they face the greatest hardships.” The reason why many of those who left comments readily assert their willingness to engage in armed conflict seems to be, first and foremost, a lack of real understanding of what a war means. After the death of those who experienced a war (the last great confrontation on the territory of Romania being World War II), the memory of those terrible times was gradually lost. The present generations come into contact with those dark realities only through the information received in school and through commemorative materials, which mainly focus on the strategic, military and diplomatic aspects, and less on the daily hardships of a conflict. Among the hundreds of analyzed comments, only one mentions literature as a source of information for the everyday aspects of a war:

All Quiet on the Western Front is a brilliant book. It totally changed my opinion on war. I never thought that it was glorious, but I never realized how awful it really is. I mean, I knew that yes, people die, many get wounded, it's bad and all that. But that book puts a lot of emphasis on these things, not only on the mutilated bodies of the soldiers, but also on their broken psyche, and it makes you realize that it's actually much worse than it seems at first sight.²⁰

Most users, however, easily dismiss these horrors, deeming the achievements of war more important than its misery:

I, too, think that a war is a great waste of lives and resources, an apparently meaningless loss. But let me ask you, what do you think the fate of Romania would have been if it had remained neutral, at least in WWI? I doubt that without the sacrifice of some soldiers (indeed, more or less trained), the territories inhabited by Romanians would have been united as it happened in 1918.

I believe we must not hold on to peace at all cost, especially when we witness the violation of our freedom and dignity as Romanians. Therefore, those soldiers killed on the battlefields may not have died in vain, perhaps they fought for a beautiful goal, which they achieved a century ago. If we had bowed before Austria-Hungary or other opponents, I don't think we would be talking about Greater Romania today.²¹

The Videos about WWI and the Great Union As a Learning Tool

A GREAT NUMBER of the analyzed comments express the users' appreciation for the quality of the information in these videos, from the viewpoint of students preparing for an exam, or of laymen. Although, of course, these events are part of the school curriculum and are covered in history textbooks, many students seem to learn better from visual materials on the internet. The comments on the videos posted on such channels as "Istorie pe șleau" are a good example in this regard:

Tomorrow I have a history test about the formation of Greater Romania, I am glad you exist on YouTube.

I really appreciate your videos because I have the baccalaureate exam the next year.

There is more history in this video than I have ever learned in all my years in school, explained simply and beautifully. Congratulations and respect.

If only the teachers taught so beautifully . . .

You made me love history... Bravo!

Tomorrow I have a history test on this. Perfect.²²

Superb. As a teenager in the 10th grade, I can say I didn't know many of the things here, thank you for teaching me more than what I have learned in school.

You have my respect.²³

The popularity of these videos as learning tools is not limited to students. Many other users express the same opinion, along with feelings of gratitude and appreciation. Some even wonder why certain events, expected to stir controversy, such as the campaign of the Romanian army in Hungary in 1919, are missing from the textbooks; the answers to this question come from conspiracy theorists: “The system is to blame. They want us to forget our history.”²⁴

There is unanimous agreement that these videos, accessible to anyone, have a great contribution to the learning of history by a large variety of users. At the same time, they strengthen the national identity and inspire feelings of patriotism, love for the homeland, and national pride. Still, some users complain about the fact that the videos on historical topics are far less numerous than others, alluding especially to entertainment videos, some of them attracting millions of views, even when they are of poor quality.

The Glorious Past Versus the Shameful Present

A CENTURY AFTER these events, they appear shrouded in a halo of glory, unlike today's times. Many comments emphasize the difference between “back then” and “now.” The politicians from “back then” were able to put the national interest above their personal one, as opposed to those from “now,” seen as a largely corrupt and incompetent political class. The leaders from “back then” dedicated their lives to serving their country, but those of today only want to steal and replenish their coffers. The Great Union was possible a century ago because the leaders of that time were “political titans,” as opposed to the “political pygmies” of today who “every day mock this great political and national achievement.” The generation of the Union made great sacrifices for their descendants to have a better life, but the inability and ill-will of the current politicians undermined this goal. In this context, some consider that the festivities and parades organized on 1 December 2018, on the occasion of the Centenary, are unjustified: “Beautiful parade! What a pity that we have 6 million unemployed Romanians. Probably, before we arm ourselves and shout ‘Long live the Union!’, we should create a strong industry, a modern agriculture

and food industry, to provide jobs for Romanians, to bring back the talent gone abroad. That way we would have a reason to defend our country, to shout ‘Long live the Union!’”²⁵ Another user is equally eloquent: “What a shame it is to have a national day with the country run by criminals.”²⁶

The general impression is that “back then” Romania’s situation was better than “now,” an idea accompanied by comments with anti-European and anti-globalization overtones—the current political class is not only corrupt and incompetent, but has also “sold” the country to foreigners, to multinational companies, to the European Union, NATO, etc. Some take their xenophobic feelings so far that they even protest against foreign guests at the 1 December 2018 parade in Bucharest: “Other countries have nothing to do with the Romanian national day parade.”²⁷

Such comments account for a sizable share of the total number, and show that the public opinion in Romania still circulates certain clichés and stereotypes that have endured for decades (the negative comparison of the present with the past and the “we shall not sell our country” slogan are a constant presence in the thinking of Romanians).

“Transylvania is Ours”

THE COMMEMORATION of the First World War and of the events leading to the Great Union inevitably bring into question the situation of one of the Romanian provinces united with the Kingdom of Romania—Transylvania. This was included in the Hungarian part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and its history was marred by centuries of conflict between Romanians and Hungarians, due to a visible imbalance of forces: although the Romanians were the majority population in this province, the political and economic power was held by Hungarians. The history of Transylvania has seen many conflicts, both political and armed, between Romanians and Hungarians. As a result, a certain sense of animosity between the two ethnic groups has survived to this day.

The comments in this category vary greatly in style and content. Some simply declare: “Transylvania is ours!!!! It belongs to the Romanians!!!!” Others are true lectures that review various moments in the common history of Romanians and Hungarians, in order to highlight the rights of Romanians over Transylvania. Some have a bellicose tone: “Remember that the Romanians seized Budapest twice!!!!!! I don’t think you want a third time.”²⁸

More than in other categories of topics, here the comments often slip towards xenophobic and racist insults, mainly against Hungarians, but also against

Gypsies or foreigners in general. The phenomenon is similar to any online environment open to comments: along with those who express various ideas on a subject, there is always a number of haters who spread aggression and hostility.

The Connection with the Personal Family History

ANOTHER ASPECT that stands out is the very small number of comments about the experience of war of users' families—grandparents or great-grandparents. Obviously, 100 years after these events those who experienced them are no longer alive. But, apparently, neither their life stories, nor the participation in the war or the daily life in those times were passed on over the generations. I have encountered very few such comments:

Here, at Oituz, my great-grandfather Ion Barbalata also fought and came home covered in medals, but he shed a lot of blood in defense of the country (he was in a lot of bayonet charges, God rest his soul).²⁹

With great surprise I recently discovered this film—quite impressive—that reminded me of the stories of my grandfather, who fought in the mountain units and was wounded at Cireșoaia (buried by a howitzer shell) in the campaign of 1917. Congratulations to those who strive to preserve the knowledge about the heroic deeds of the Romanians for the benefit of today and tomorrow's generations!³⁰

This scarcity of personal stories can be seen as paradoxical when it comes to people who otherwise seem to take pride in the achievements of their ancestors (who fought in the war and made the Union); it would have been more natural for them to identify with their great-grandfathers who took part in those events or who lived in those times. A possible explanation for this absence may be the destruction of the traditional lifestyle caused by the communist regime: due to the policy of forced urbanization, hundreds of thousands of people were moved from their villages to cities, which uprooted them and weakened the connection with their origins. The sense of belonging to a multigenerational family has been lost, breaking the ties with the ancestors and their memories.

TO CONCLUDE, it appears that the Centenary and the Great Union, although they generated some degree of attention in social media, did not attract as much interest as other categories of internet content (the most watched Romanian YouTube channels refer mainly to music and games).³¹ The user comments show superficial knowledge of these historical events, as well as their perception through the lens of clichés and stereotypes. Declarations of

patriotism and calls to arms are easily made by those who, from the comfort of their own homes, know they will never have to back their words with actions. This situation confirms the conclusions of other researches who showed that, despite the numerous events organized by various institutions, the involvement of the public was disappointingly low.³²



Notes

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Abstract

An Inquiry into Popular Perceptions of the Centenary and of the Great Union
As Expressed in the Social Media

The Centenary and the Great Union of 1918 have generated many festivities and events in Romania during the last few years. However, their impact on the public seems to have been quite low. This study aims to analyze the reactions to these manifestations as expressed in comments posted on YouTube videos dedicated to these events. Some distinct categories of ideas have been identified: “Hail to the heroes,” the value of these videos as learning tools, or the past versus the present.

Keywords

Centenary, Great Union, 1918, First World War, internet, YouTube, comments