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The Great Union of 1918 in Post-1989 Romania: Academic and Public Discourse¹**Abstract**

The paper attempts to discuss, analyze and interpret the way in which the Great Union of 1918 is being dealt with in the academic and public discourses in post-1989 Romania. More specifically, we examine the main perceptions, perspectives and approaches to the unity visions of the Romanian nationalists that have been adopted in the Romanian academic and public sphere from the early 1990's until the centennial anniversary year which commemorates Romania's Great Union. The unity aspirations of the Romanian nationalists had certainly been an integral part of the nation-building process and had influenced the national domestic and foreign policy from the mid of the 19th century until 1918. The formation of *Greater Romania* (Romanian: România Mare) after the WWI and its perception and interpretation has also had a pivotal place in the Romanian historiography in the years that followed and revealed certain views of the Romanian society concerning the past and present of the Romanian people.

Taking into consideration the changes that have taken place in the fields of history writing and historiography as a consequence of the major institutional, political and ideological changes in post-communist Romania, we focus our interest on the following factors: a) The continuities and ruptures between the communist and the post-communist discourses b) the role of contemporary politics in the discursive construction of the Romanian Great Idea.

Key words: Great Union, Romanian Great Idea, post-communist discourse, Romanian historiography

Introduction

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Terms, Definitions, Concepts

The term *Great Union* refers to the fulfillment of the idea of the unification of all ethnic Romanians and territories where they lived into one national state. It is perceived as the final stage of the long process of the Romanian national project. The main previous stages of that process had been the Revolution of 1848, the Unification of the Romanian Principalities (Wallachia and Moldavia) in 1859 and the achievement of independence of the Romanian state in 1877. The rapid military and political developments caused by the WWI and the Russian Revolution of 1917 gave the Romanian political leaders and the Romanian population the opportunity to move forward with the unification process. The declarations of the Union of Bessarabia (27 March 1918), the Union of Bucovina (28 November 1918) and finally the declaration of the Union of Transylvania, Banat, Crişana and Maramureş with the Romanian kingdom, on December 1, 1918 by the Assembly of the delegates of ethnic Romanians held in Alba Iulia were three major steps and political acts which led to the accomplishment of the Great Union. The Great Union was internationally recognized by the Treaties of Saint-Germain-en-Laye (10 September 1919) and Trianon (4 June 1920). On August 1 1990 the December the 1st was declared as the National Holiday of Romania (Centenarul României 1918-2018, 2018).

Theoretical framework and methodology

Our research and analysis is based upon i) general theoretical works and studies on the role of academic and public discourses in the nation-building process and on historiography and its connection to the socio-political and ideological context and ii) certain Romanian academic narratives-academic conferences, monographs, scholarly articles- and public discourses, such as press coverages, media reports, literature and commemorative practices, which reflect the main trends, views, perceptions, controversies and debates in contemporary Romanian society concerning the unification process, the Romanian national identity and the past and present of the Romanian state.

The theoretical framework of our research and analysis is based on Eric Hobsbawm's theory of the 'invented traditions' and on Ruth Wodak's conception of the '*discursive construction of national identities*' and the '*discursive strategies*'.

According to Hobsbawm (2012), ‘...the ideological and political mechanisms of nation-states use invented traditions and symbols in order to prove that the nations are deep-rooted in the past and, consequently, are not the result of construction...’. The collective memory of each national community is a complex social phenomenon, a process during which the events of the past are constructed and reconstructed according to the needs of the present. These new symbols- inventions are presented as components of the national movements and nation-states and constitute images which personify the nation. The mechanisms of the contemporary nations claim that these invented traditions are deep-rooted in the antiquity and are in no case constructed (pp. 263-308).

According to Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl, and Liebhart’s collective study (1999), nations and national identities are imagined communities which are constructed, reproduced and contested through certain discursive strategies and techniques. There are different types of macro-strategies employed in the discursive formation of national identity:

Constructive strategies are the most comprehensive discursive strategies. They attempt to construct and to establish a certain national identity by promoting unification, identification and solidarity, as well as differentiation. Strategies of perpetuation attempt to maintain and to reproduce a threatened national identity, i.e. to preserve, support and protect it. A special subgroup of these strategies is the group of strategies of justification. These are employed primarily in relation to problematical actions or events in the past which are important in the narrative creation of national history... (p. 33).

We will, therefore, attempt to analyze the structure and the discursive strategies which are employed in the Romanian academic and public narratives on the the Great Union of 1918 by relying also on studies which deal with the continuities and discontinuities between the communist and post-communist discourses regarding the issue of the Romanian national identity (Verdery, 1991; Petrescu, 2012) and on the institutional, political and ideological context of historiography in post-communist Romania (Culic, 2005).

The Great Union of 1918 in Romanian historiography until 1989

There are certain continuities, discontinuities and ruptures in Romanian historiography and public discourses concerning the establishment of Greater Romania in 1918. The different political regimes and ideological factors and mechanisms have certainly defined the character and the orientation of the discourses on Romanian national identity and more specifically the perception of the Great Union throughout the interwar, the communist and post-communist period. The interwar historiography and public discourses were defined mainly by the prevalence of the homogenization politics in interwar Romania (Livezeanu, 1995). The grand narratives of that period, such as Nicolae Iorga’s synthesis *Istoria Românilor* which was published between 1936 and 1939, highlighted the natural character of the union between the new provinces and the Old Kingdom, the legitimacy of Romania’s territorial claims, the successful process of the formation of a Romanian unitary state and the role played by the Royal House during World War I (Mârza, 2015: 45-46).

The communist takeover in Romania represented a major shift in the field of history-writing and the articulation of public narratives. The new ideological and

political imperatives had a great impact upon historical research and its methodological tools, since Romanian national history and past was reinterpreted and reconstructed according to the principles of Marxist historical materialism. Nevertheless, we can discern significant discontinuities in the evolution of the communist historiography in Romania. During the first decade (1947-1958) prevailed the Stalinist perspective and the rewriting of the national narrative involved mainly the glorification of Russia and the Soviet Union and the emphasis on the Slavic factor in the ethnogenesis of the Romanians (Petrescu, 2012: 158-159). Concerning the Great Union of 1918 emphasis was given on the imperialist character of WWI, the struggle of Great Powers for conquest of new territories and spheres of interest, Russia's positive role during the War, the negative role of the Romanian bourgeoisie, the sufferings of the masses and the October Revolution of 1917 (Roller, 1952: 490-508; Mârza, 2015: 51-52).

During the period of national communism in Romania (1965-1989) and in the political context of Romania's detachment from the Soviet influence Romanian historiography combined elements of Marxism-Leninism and Romanian nationalism (Verdery, 1991). WWI and the Great Union of 1918 were perceived and interpreted through the prism of class-struggle and the ideal of national unity. In the historical narratives of that period, such as Andrei Oțetea's work *Istoria Poporului Român* (History of the Romanian People, 1970) and the historical synthesis *Istoria Românilor* (1975) written by C. and D. Giurescu, Romania's participation in the WWI and especially the unification of Transylvania with Romania were regarded as the achievement of Romania's legitimate goals and the fulfillment of the aspirations of all social classes (Mârza, 2015: 52-53). The official perspective on national history is illustrated in the communist leader Nicolae Ceaușescu's speeches in which he glorified the Romanian past, the Romanian identity and the Great Union:

The setting up of the (Romanian) unitary national state six and a half decades ago was a brilliant historic victory of the long heroic struggle of the masses for creating the Romanian nation and the coming true of the age old dream of all Romanians to live in unity within the borders of the same country, in one free and independent state... (Jaraus, Lindenberger, & Ramsbrock, 2007: 39-42).

Academic and Public Discourses on Romanian national identity and the interpretation of the Great Union from the 1990's to the present

After 1989 the major ideological, political and institutional shifts have had an impact upon the historical studies and the public discourses regarding the interpretation of the past. In the academic and public sphere prevail discourses which reject the Marxist interpretation of the past, adopt new approaches to the national issues and give emphasis on the European and western character of the Romanian society. There are no major differences between the academic and public discourses, since academicians are being more and more engaged in the debates concerning the past in the public sphere (Murgescu, 2003; Culic, 2005).

The majority of the Romanian scholars seem to adopt the ethnocentric approach to the Great Union, since the Great Union is being regarded as the natural outcome of a long-awaited process which fulfills the aspirations of the Romanian nation. The territorial claims of the Romanian people are being justified through demographic and historical arguments. One of the main topics of various monographs

and collective works is the Bessarabian question and its historical and political dimensions, a thorny issue which could not be dealt with during the previous decades due to the political regimes in Soviet Union and Romania and the complicated Soviet-Romanian relations. In 1994 the historian Ioan Scurtu coordinated a study on the history of the region of Bessarabia which was reedited in 1999 and 2003 (Scurtu, 1994). The same historian is the author of numerous studies on the role of political figures, such as Ion I.C. Brătianu (Scurtu, 1992), Iuliu Maniu (Scurtu, 1995a) and King Ferdinand (Scurtu, 1995b), in the preparation, fulfillment and affirmation of the unification process. The diplomatic aspects of the Great Union and more specifically Romania's participation in the Paris Peace Conference (1919-1920) and the ratification of the Great Union have been thoroughly studied by Buzatu, Dobrinescu, and Dumitrescu (1999). The major features of this mainstream historiographical production on Great Union in the post-communist era are the analysis and interpretation of archival sources and the focus on military, diplomatic and political events combined with romantic nationalism and the primordialist perception of ethnicity. There is a certain connection between the pre-communist and post-communist historiography and it is not coincidental that many historical studies of the interwar period which dealt with aspects of the Great Union are being critically reedited and evaluated as major contributions to Romanian national historiography.

There are also scholars who adopt the modernist-critical approach: They challenge aspects of the Romanian grand-narrative or attempt to fully deconstruct it. Such is the case of Lucian Boia, Professor at the University of Bucharest who published in 1997 his work *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness (Istorie și mit în conștiința românească)*. From his point of view there is no objective history and there cannot be any objective history in the future. Romanian history is full of constructions and myths such as the theory of Daco-Roman origin, the continuity in the Carpatho-Pontic space and national unity (Scurtu, 2009). The issue of the Great Union should, therefore, not be evaluated exclusively as the natural outcome of the Romanians' efforts. It should be put in a broader context and examined as the outcome of several internal and external factors (Boia, 2011). The views and argumentations of the proponents of the modernist-critical approach provoked serious discussions and controversies both in the academic field and in the public sphere from the 1990's onwards. According to many analysts, these heated debates reflect the fluid social, ideological and political scene in post-communist Romania and more specifically, the controversy between *Autochtonists* and *Westerners* (Murgescu, 2003: 46).

Academic and Public Discourses on the Great Union in the context of the Centennial Anniversary

The centennial anniversary year which commenced in January 2018 was the ideal occasion for the organization of academic events and public ceremonies and the creation of numerous media coverages and digital projects on the Great Union of 1918 and its significance for Romania and the Romanian people. During that period various monographs, collective studies and collections of documents related to the Great Union were published with the attempt to shed light upon unknown aspects of the formation of Greater Romania (Bucur, 2017). The majority of the academicians, journalists, researchers and politicians produce 'grand' national narratives by focusing

on the role of great personalities (politicians, diplomats, military officers) to the achievement of the Great Union. The main topics of these discourses are the developments during the WWI which led to the Great Union and the still unresolved issue of Bessarabia (Agrigoroaiei, 2018).

Web-pages, blogs and the social media played a significant role in the production and diffusion of ‘digital grand national narratives’ to the public. Such is the case of *CENTENARUL ROMÂNIEI*², a project dedicated to the Centenary of the Great Union, which contains multimodal texts with historical material and information on the events of the WWI which led to the achievement of Romanian national goals. Although the creators of this project claim that it was independent and not created upon the initiative of any public or private institution, it is more than obvious that the content of this web-page reflects the mainstream discourse on the events of the Great Union. Romania and the Romanian people are glorified and almost mythicised:

Entering the war to bring Romanians living in the Austro-Hungarian Empire into one national state, after two years of huge military and civilian losses, Romanians emerged victorious and, in the most favourable international context, by their own democratic will, were ready to complete what they had been fighting for: the unification of all Romanian provinces in one state... (Centenarul României 1918-2018, 2018).

One can also clearly discern the employment of constructive discursive strategies with the aim to construct and to establish the Romanian national identity by promoting unification, identification and solidarity of the Romanian people as well as strategies of perpetuation as an attempt to maintain and to reproduce the threatened Romanian national identity and strategies of justification:

Transylvania (including its neighbouring provinces: Banat, Crişana and Maramureş), Bukovina and Bessarabia were territories inhabited by Romanians since their formation as a distinct people. Over time, these Romanian provinces became individual parts of various kingdoms and empires. Despite their inclusion into foreign states, the Romanians managed to preserve their ethnic and cultural identity throughout the centuries... A short look at the map of Romania in 1918 and in 2018 shows us that the joy of the Great Union Centenary cannot be full. Romania does not look any more as it looked 100 years ago, after the Great Union. On the 28th of June 1940, as a result of the Ribentrop-Molotov Pact, Romania loses again Bessarabia and Bucovina. The tragic shadow of that day for Romania is still felt in the Romanian soul. The commemoration of the Centenary should be, apart from a celebration full of joy, a reason of reflection and awareness that it is our duty to build again what the Romanians fulfilled on the 1st of December 1918. On the occasion of the 100th Anniversary of the Great Union we should know that Romania is not complete without Bessarabia and the north of Bucovina! (Centenarul României 1918-2018, 2018).

The Centenary year gave also impetus to heated discussions and controversies among the intellectuals. Such was the case of Ioan Aurel Pop and Lucian Boia, two eminent historians, whose contrasting interpretations of the Great Union reflect the academic and public debates on Romanian national identity and the role of historians. As Zahorán (2018) states, Ioan-Aurel Pop and Lucian Boia have both published theses on the Great Union of 1918 and represent two opposing streams of contemporary Romanian scholarship. Ioan Aurel Pop is a medievalist, member of the

² <https://centenarulromaniei.ro/>

Romanian Academy and the rector of Babeş–Bolyai University. Lucian Boia is a former professor of Bucharest University, who, as mentioned above, became known in the late 1990s with his book on Romanian historical myths, a provocative work which challenges the Romanian national ideology, deconstructs the Romanian imaginary, discusses the connections between national identity, history and politics and introduces the postmodernist perspective into the Romanian historical discourse (Boia, 2011). Ioan Aurel Pop in his scholarly articles and interviews states that the Romanian efforts towards national unity represented a national desire, their national program had universal support and that in the Romanian state formation process prevailed the majority principle. Pop in his argumentation gives emphasis on the Wilsonian principles of democracy and national self-determination and on the international recognition of the border changes immediately after the World War I (Pop, 2018). He, therefore, argues that since the creation of Greater Romania is the result of a democratic national process and international treaties, any alternative approach and revisionist interpretation of the historical events could be instrumentalized by anti-Romanian propaganda which challenges the current status-quo in the broader region (Zahorán, 2018).

Lucian Boia, on the contrary, gives emphasis on the role of the long-term process of nation-building and state formation and on the role of processes of ethnic homogenization in Eastern Europe. He is focusing on the multiplicity of perspectives and the complexity of historical phenomena and attempts to critically analyze the territorial demands of Romania towards Hungary (Boia, 2017). In his work entitled *De la Dacia antică la Marea Unire, de la Marea Unire la România de azi* (From the ancient Dacia to the Great Union, from the Great Union to Contemporary Romania) published in 2018, Boia highlights the political instrumentalization of the past and the entire Romanian history in the context of the centennial anniversary. His harsh criticism of the *grand narratives* produced by great historians, such as Neagu Djuvara and Ioan Bogdan, aims to deconstruct the idea of continuity between Dacia and Romania and the myth of national unity. He regards both *continuity* and *unity* as constructions of the Romanian nationalist and national-communist historiography. According to Boia (2018), both the Little Union in 1859 and the Great Union in 1918 were mainly the results of external factors, such as the Crimean War and the support of Napoleon the Third in the case of the Unification of the Romanian Principalities and the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the case of the formation of Greater Romania. He also points to the conflicts within Romanian political elites on the eve of World War I and the failure of the Romanian state to successfully integrate the minorities during the interwar period.

Conclusions

The post-1989 academic and public discourses on the Great Union of 1918 reflect mainly the ideological, political and institutional changes which have had an impact upon the historical studies and the interpretation of the past, the pivotal role of contemporary politics in the discursive construction of the Romanian Great Idea but also different approaches to the question of the Romanian national identity. Although the mainstream academic and political circles promote grand national narratives which present Romania as a national subject with legitimate national goals and aspirations, the public debates and controversies between historians concerning

questions of origins, continuity and unity of the Romanian People reveal the existence of different perceptions of the Romanian past and critical approaches to the Great Union of 1918 as a historical phenomenon with multiple political, social and geopolitical dimensions.

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