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## **Self-Censorship (of the Pre-Emptive Kind): English-written Discourses as a Lens into Romanian Self-Identification**

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**Abstract:** In the aftermath of the Great War, the view of the English-speaking world on the Balkans posed a challenge to Romanian self-identification patterns. English-language memoirs by US servicemen and that of Marie, Queen of Romania, capture the spirit of the times. They spell out, on the one hand, the conviction that the Romanian kingdom was part and parcel of a new, thoroughly Balkanized Europe, and demonstrate, on the other hand, how the path forward for a new-found home country can be shaped. Their stories feature the Romanians as yet another imagined community in the making, a nation whose identity is otherized as a marginal offshoot of emerging national traditions in the Balkans. In the process, they reveal productive censorship and self-censorship on a discursive scale commonly seen in colonial matrices of power.

**Keywords:** Romania; The Balkans; (Self-) Censorship; Peripheralization.

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### **Introduction**

Historically, mastery of foreign languages helped Romanian elites in the search for geopolitical partners<sup>1</sup>. Particularly at the time of nation-building<sup>2</sup>, throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, French and German, as spoken by native Romanians, were conducive to making continental Europe aware of Romania. Nowadays, English has taken over. It has come to serve as the prestige language of education and science<sup>3</sup>. English is the most common foreign language taught in Romanian schools<sup>4</sup> and increasingly present across social media. Its growing influence has long spilled into the country's popular culture, with the British Broadcasting Corporation at the forefront of change in Romanian TV at the time of the communist regime<sup>5</sup>.

Alongside other foreign languages (i.e., French, German), speaking and writing English is a means of engaging political issues that underlie the way the Romanians have come to think about themselves. For example, it has brought about postcolonial sensibilities that simply did not exist in the mainstream of Romanian life. They have changed

the way Romanians approach their own “imagined community”<sup>6</sup>, once again through Western political lenses. The “production of peripheries through social relations and their spatial implications”<sup>7</sup> can summarize what is widely regarded as being characteristically Romanian, i.e., marginal to Western civilization. Notably, cultural peripheralization has everything to do with English as a vehicle for science and politics in Romania. This has had lasting effects on the narrative images that explore the relationship between discursive self-regulation and the (self-)censorship of public dissent in Romanian literary culture. Literary discourses have long done their share in naturalizing “Romanian marginality”<sup>8</sup> by exploring local narratives of self-identification as a matter of self-censorship. Censorship and self-censorship, of the pre-emptive kind, come across as forms of self-assertion. It is commonly expressed by political elites already enmeshed in Western-centric cultural structures. Consequently, “self-censorship for reasons of self-interest to avoid external negative sanctions and gain positive ones”<sup>9</sup> is easy to spot. Ultimately, self-censorship helps establishing a sense of identity widely shared in Romanian society.

As a matter of fact, broad “imaginative geographies of Romania and the Balkanist assumptions that underpin such representations”<sup>10</sup> have always been at play in the making of Romanian self-representations. Essentially, conventional wisdom on the Balkans means that “the uses of Balkanism”<sup>11</sup> have not changed much ever since the so-called Romanian escape from this troubled peninsula of Eastern Europe turned out to be impossible<sup>12</sup>. The failed attempt at emphasizing Central European traditions in the former Habsburg provinces of Romania essentially means

downplaying the influence of the Balkans. This results in circumlocution, most of the times “verbal indirection [which] is a face-saving or face-maintenance strategy. It also serves as a marker of ‘diplomacy’ and of politeness”<sup>13</sup>. As a matter of fact, periphrasis and, specifically, the prefix “peri” – from Greek “about, around”<sup>14</sup> – should explain some of the difficulty native speakers of English seem to have in coming to terms with the way Romanian elites advocate a local identity. Consequently, they construe verbal indirection as acts of self-censorship. For example, American servicemen, in the aftermath of the Great War, were not comfortable with the Romanian penchant for circumlocution. Afraid of straightforward talk, Romanian decision makers produce discourses “associated with periphrasis [which] begins to suggest a refusal to name its subject that emphasizes the fact of its elision”<sup>15</sup>. This way of talking (and doing) is revealing of the “colonial matrix of power in [...] Romania, ex-colony of non-Western empires (the Ottomans and the Soviets and now becoming a colony – as many others – of the European Union)”<sup>16</sup>. Ultimately, “periphrasis is defined in terms of the dimensions which define syntax and morphology”<sup>17</sup>. Its use value describes the process whereby the peripheralization of Romanian self-identification came into being, quite often, as self-censorship. Multi-word periphrastic constructions are used for a variety of reasons: in order to speak around (rather than directly to issues), as a figure of emphasis, and, ultimately, as a means *not* to commit to taking action.

Thanks to documentary writing in English, the long history of exoticizing Romanian communities through narrative

means is much easier to follow. Early twentieth-century memoirs give a glimpse into several “histories of coloniality (that is, the historiography of the periphery)”<sup>18</sup> at work in the making of Romanian literary culture. Documentary storytelling is particularly revealing of the “socio-spatial ascriptions in the [...] peripheralization”<sup>19</sup> process, which existing literature describes as already in place in Romania. Economic peripheralization, and the response to it from the natives, can therefore be understood against this background: it amounts to the formation of an entire “critical culture” that functioned as a kind of “barbarian theorizing”<sup>20</sup>.

### **Self-Censorship between Emphasis and Understatement**

Despite the wide cultural and chronological divide, early twentieth century documentary literature on the kingdom of Romania<sup>21</sup> and twenty-first century Romanian social science<sup>22</sup>, written in English, claim to make sense of Romanian history on behalf of the same English-speaking audiences. When read contrastively, they make self-evident narrative frames that strip Romanian identity back to shared findings of “structural censorship”<sup>23</sup>, overwhelmingly apparent in its effect on Romanian characters. They reveal “historical developments and local variants”<sup>24</sup> of (self-)censorship as well as what appears to be a spatially-structured dependency of the modern nation of Romania on the socially-produced space of the West. I confirm this information against the twenty-first century examples of “learning democracy and market economy in post-communist

Romania”<sup>25</sup> and “higher education reforms in Romania between the Bologna process and national challenges”<sup>26</sup>.

In my reading, the memoirs of Queen Marie of Romania make available narrative images of national resilience as paving the way from the writings of American diplomats and servicemen to twenty-first century social science authored by Romanian academics. As such, Western-centric notions of progress rendered in English by periphrastic and elliptical language are interrelated, being brought into the process of understanding the country as one of “Europe’s Eastern peripheries”<sup>27</sup>.

Emphasis and understatement highlight instances of periphrasis and ellipsis. Explicitly, the country comes across as part of the Balkans (or, as far as Queen Marie is concerned, of Central Europe) for reasons that go either unmentioned or unquestioned. Not calling things by their names emphasizes the elision of local contexts outside Western-centric knowledge. Essentially, the southern province of modern Romania brings the Balkans into the fold of Romania once and for good. From the moment Wallachia’s first tribute to the Ottoman Empire “was officially paid in 1417”<sup>28</sup>, all of the “southern Romania, the seat of power, has been part of the Balkan social system”<sup>29</sup>. The Ottoman past and the city of Bucharest are the main reasons why the whole of the nation is commonly associated with the Orient<sup>30</sup>. Ultimately, various events in history brought the fate of Romania closer to that of Bulgaria or Greece than to that of Hungary or Poland. For example, Romanian independence was sealed by “the wholesale revision of Balkan boundaries in the treaty of Berlin in July 1878”<sup>31</sup>. No matter what they say, fleeing

from the Balkans turns out not to be an option for the Romanian elites:

it is not only geography that has urged our political leaders to point out that the Balkans are one thing and the Carpathians are another [...] whenever Westerners consider Romania to be a Balkan country<sup>32</sup>.

Drawing on the notion of censorship and self-censorship can show that public narratives about Romanian political history are highly significant to the “making of peripheries rather than [to] their geographical location”<sup>33</sup>. My primary sources are “attached to groups and categories, cultures and institutions”; they “provide recognized ‘accounts’ one can give of one’s behavior, accounts that identify where one belongs, what one is doing and why”<sup>34</sup>. Explicitly, ever since specific instances of national stereotyping surfaced in American diplomatic reports – alongside possibly more influential (French or even German) examples – they have stayed with Romanian speakers of English, be they political scientists or policy-makers. Effectively, these rhetorical commonplaces have come to define and otherize Romania and the country’s elites. They pose the act of self-censuring oneself in-between Romanian and Western European identities. As if periphrasis corresponded to the boundary between native English-speakers and the Eastern European country, for the former, veiled speech is necessarily an offer that requires compromise on their side. This narrative tends to imagine self-censorship as simply a ploy to fool Western envoys into believing that Romania is committed to transparency and good governance.

Next, I attempt to trace the afterlife of such frames of understanding propagated by American documentary writing in Romanian social and education sciences.

### **A Geohistorical Scenario for the North of the Balkans: Reporting on Romania in the Aftermath of WWI**

Even as a full-fledged member of the European Union, the “geohistorical scenario”<sup>35</sup> for Romania fails to move beyond “the premodern that marked much of the interwar representation of the Balkans”<sup>36</sup>. Despite the fact that Romanian nationals are otherized in unflattering terms, the American outlook on the country, and particularly on its citizens, has had lasting effects.

Authored by General Harry Hill Bandholtz and Colonel Stephen Bonsal, “newspaperman, diplomat, linguist”<sup>37</sup>, two books paint a picture of the Romanian elites as mostly clueless, yet vindictive, new Europeans. All Romanians (Queen Marie included) are well-known for engaging in the art of circumlocution, not for its own sake, but in order to counter American knowledge about their country. Communication skills, which count as self-censorship, (fail to) prevent American diplomats from finding everything there is to know about the state of affairs in Romania and Romanian-occupied Hungary. The original text of Bandholtz was published in 1933 by Columbia University Press, under the title *An Undiplomatic Diary – by the American Member of the Inter-Allied Military Mission to Hungary 1919 – 1920*. First published in 1946 by Prentice Hall Inc., Bonsal’s *Suitors and Suppliants: The Little Nations at Versailles* is the makeover of

*Unfinished Business*, a diary he kept in Paris, during the Peace Treaty negotiations that ended WWI. Effectively, the literary image of Romania parallels “the discovery of the Balkans”<sup>38</sup> by Western travelers, this time, by the American army and diplomacy in the first decades of the twentieth century. All of the American envoys seem to look back at the time they spent in Romania (or in close proximity to the country) with astonishment.

American writers (who happened to either live in Romania or have close contact with Romanian nationals) rely on stock images and narrative frames that, more than a hundred years later, help Romanian academics and policy-makers debate topical issues. As far as they were concerned, the country belonged to the Balkans.

The authors of documentary literature on Romania, meant for the English-speaking public, seem to have been proven right by history once the Eastern Bloc fell. In other words, corruption and bad governance are, once again, believed to be the main challenges to the future of the country. As early as the first decades of the last century, the Americans pointed out that the country has already been “exploited by a gang of unscrupulous politicians [which] is apt to blind the eyes of the average foreign observer to the real qualities of this people”<sup>39</sup>.

Reading twenty-first century Romanian political science, I find evidence in support of the above-mentioned argument. Two books written in English by Romanians help me look into the language patterns that have stayed with the indigent public ever since the US discovered Romania. Obviously, the relation between my primary sources is not straightforward,

to say the least. Notwithstanding, I argue that particular historical moments are held accountable for current cultural and political practices in the mainstream of Romanian life. Public storytelling about them in various media, from history textbooks to narrative fiction, has defined much in the same way Romanianness ever since. Romanians tell the world mostly about momentous events that shaped the course of the nation’s history. On the one hand, they give a glimpse into the stereotyping of other national groups that, by contrast, delineate what should help the modern nation stand out among its neighbors. On the other hand, these public narratives are a reply to the report issued by American diplomats and servicemen on Romanian exploits at the time of W.W.I. The way Romanian political science quotes them makes the point that “it is [...] the self-view of one’s group, rather than the tangible characteristics, that is of essence in determining the existence or nonexistence of a nation”<sup>40</sup>.

Conclusively, Romania comes across both as a Balkan country and a Balkanized nation, strikingly antagonistic to most, if not all of its neighbors. There is not much of a debate regarding the people of Romania either. The American take on what was to become Greater Romania leaves no room for doubt: there is not much that the Romanians have to show for themselves when it comes to the country’s contribution to the Great War, and European civilization for that matter. I find worthy of critical notice the afterlife of these English-written records of the way Romanians get things done. In a loose sense of the term, the institutional culture of Romania is grounded in what the Americans

call “the characteristic Roumanian style of begging the issue”<sup>41</sup>, which results in a sense of discomfiture about their experience with the people and the country.

As they were enforcing the rule of law in the borderlands of Eastern Europe, the ‘Roumanians’ of Harry Hill Bandholtz and Stephen Bonsal became permanent fixtures in the lives of the American military. “Little Rumania”<sup>42</sup> did her best to act the part of a European nation, yet the Americans could not help but notice the obvious:

On the following day, House advised Hoover in general terms of what the Prime Minister had said. He received it with the most perfect equanimity. “Bratianu is a liar and a horse thief—that’s all there is to it”. Then as an afterthought. “I hope God will help the Rumanians—I cannot”<sup>43</sup>.

Corruption and nepotism are troubles that started for the same reasons all over the Balkans: the elites at the pinnacle of political power live their privilege as foreign-educated politicians who indulge in deception. In the 1920s, Romania had a German born king and a British born queen – a niece of Queen Victoria. They did more than to turn a blind eye on the behavior of their newly-found subjects. In fact, both of them tried to advance the agenda of their adoptive nation by means of self-censorship as self-interested behavior. In the first place, Marie of Romania reveals her own sense of disbelief with the “spirit of censorious and almost hostile criticism”<sup>44</sup> directed against her, something she experienced as the Queen of her “newly established country”<sup>45</sup>. In a great example of self-censorship amongst the

elite, she concludes that “the Roumanians are sceptical and have a sharp, not always kindly, sense of humour”<sup>46</sup>.

Secondly, this does not prove Queen Marie wrong in her appropriation of Romanian patriotism: “Little by little I had become a conscious patriot, a willing part of the great machine, and that feeling of love and unity with my people was for me a holy feeling which rendered effort, sacrifice, abnegation worth while”<sup>47</sup>.

The hope of all Western-born officials is that providence, rather than elected officials (or the royals for that matter), will act in the best interest of ordinary Romanians. Limited political responsiveness (if any) has come to define the indigenous population whose acquiescence to foreign rule and domestic corruption was plain to see for American spectators. Appropriately enough, the “chameleon-like [...] wit”<sup>48</sup> of King Ferdinand of Romania, who is savvy in dealing with people, is something acknowledged by his Queen quite often. Coming from a country where the natives themselves acknowledge their own lack of political agency, it would be difficult for the Americans to say otherwise. If one is to trust the story told by the poet Octavian Goga, armed newcomers seized the land of Romanian lands in the West of the country and hardly faced any resistance. There is no convincing argument as to why the natives failed to stand up for themselves, given their sheer numbers and prestigious ancestry. Instead, they fell in line with the interests of the rather small but influential Hungarian elite. Accordingly, the natives were rounded up and placed under the control of Magyar tribes, said to have come to help fight Muslim forces. Or so it says, in so many words, the poet and the ambassador, Octavian Goga:

Magyar lords fought at our side, but when the war was won they parceled out our lands and our peasants to suit themselves. This is the history, the sad history of my people<sup>49</sup>.

The Romanian people do not live up to the American ideals about decorum and moral standards. Although aware of the mission that the US wished to accomplish in Eastern Europe, they fail to appreciate all the good brought to them by the Americans. Specifically, the US army – coming to the rescue of a nation engulfed by conflicts – conjures up traditional images of mighty Western protectors in Romanian literary culture. Allegedly, the only ones able to comprehend fully what had actually happened to the Romanian people in history are only sympathetic sister nations from afar and, definitely, transatlantic diplomats and servicemen. In this vein, the concluding line of the same Goga says it all: “and our day of redemption only dawned when Wilson sent his soldiers across the seas and liberated Europe”<sup>50</sup>. The Americans have no trouble understanding this kind of relationship between Romania and, particularly, other Latin nations of Europe. Often, the French connection surfaces in the American reports. “The Roumanians certainly could not continue their arrogant and haughty attitude unless backed by someone [...] the French and the Italians”<sup>51</sup>. For reasons that escape them, the Romanian officers are stirred into action against American interest. Everything “strengthens the suspicion that the Roumanians and French are somewhat in touch”<sup>52</sup>. However, if need be, the Roumanians act as if they were “trying to cut loose from the French and the Italians”<sup>53</sup>.

Opportunistic enough to secure their position in Hungary, they were ready to shift allegiance to Great Britain. For example, the Romanians “gave a tremendous dinner at the Hotel Hungaria, to the British officials, during which, I understand, there was much playing of “God Save the King” and much talking about Great Britain as the greatest power on earth”<sup>54</sup>.

Irrespective of the French support, the Romanian army and administration were not acting in good faith. For the American military, this is painfully obvious: the complaints against the Romanian troops stationed in Hungary were piling up on the table of general Bandholtz. He is not shy to call them by their names: thieves, fraudsters and trouble makers. “We protested to the Roumanian Headquarters against their thievish propensities”<sup>55</sup>. The excessive demands to furnish goods for alleged military purposes were the topic of the day. In their defense, the Romanians insisted “that all Roumania had been pillaged by the Huns”<sup>56</sup>. Queen Marie of Romania reportedly wondered “why shouldn’t they [the Romanian troops] now retaliate and steal from Hungary”<sup>57</sup>. “Ferdinand I of Roumania” himself twisted the truth, no matter the costs incurred by his kingly Hohenzollern predecessors: “As it is bad form to call a king a liar, I simply informed His Majesty that he was badly mistaken”<sup>58</sup>. Coming back to the queen, she gave general Bandholtz her autographed photo so that “whenever I [i.e., Bandholtz] felt hard towards the Roumanians, I could look at that, and she hoped it would make me feel more kindly”<sup>59</sup>. If one is to trust the American general, there was only one conceivable outcome of Romanian policy in Hungary:

The unreasonable and ridiculous excesses to which the Roumanians had enforced their requisitions, and in particular their crude and unnecessarily harsh methods of carrying out their seizures, had so embittered the Hungarians that it was not believed they would ever be satisfied until they had retaliated in kind<sup>60</sup>.

Not even the royal couple of Romania succeeded in winning him over. In fact, general Bandholtz quotes Magyar royalty and acknowledges his own heartfelt desire to make war on Romania. As a result of his experiences with Romanian army officials, diplomats and the royal family, he states that:

The first thing that should be done was to turn loose and invade Roumania. [...] I could not help in my heart sympathizing with him, and I don't know of anything that I would rather do just at present than fight Roumanians<sup>61</sup>.

More often than not, the Americans elaborate on the reasons behind their decision to use the Romanian ethnonym alusively for a liar. "These people down in eastern and central Europe would make Ananias look like George Washington"<sup>62</sup>. However, the same narrative voice concedes that even "the Hungarians in their turn are toying with the truth"<sup>63</sup>.

Both Harry Hill Bandholtz and Stephen Bonsal are of the opinion that there is only one course of action to be taken. The Romanian officials need to be taught how to respect their neighbors. These people of the East would stop at nothing to get what

they wanted: i.e., their own military and political survival. As far as the two US officials are concerned, the intent to deceive is paramount in the minds of most if not all Romanians. For Bandholtz they are "those sons of Ananias, the Roumanians"<sup>64</sup>; for Bonsal, the Romanian elite was liable to be charged "with entering the war too late and of having surrendered too soon"<sup>65</sup>. Taken one at a time, the Romanian soldier "typifies perfectly the Roumanian policy of procrastination"<sup>66</sup>, the diplomat is the embodiment of "the futility of hoping for anything from the Roumanians"<sup>67</sup>, while the military administration produces texts "in the characteristic Roumanian style of begging the issue and of circumlocution, [which meant that] Rudeanu's letter was neither affirmative nor negative"<sup>68</sup>. This is what accounts for the exploits of the Romanian side in the Great War as well. Explicitly, the transatlantic perspective on their feats of war is that they "capitulated too soon and bargained too promptly with the Germans"<sup>69</sup>. Furthermore, the troops stationed in Hungary seem to have indulged in dubious enterprises: "there has just been issued from Roumanian Headquarters an order prohibiting Roumanian officers from continuing to use rouge and lip sticks. It will certainly be hard on the poor dears"<sup>70</sup>. It feels safe to say that the Romanians were not only 'thievish' but also eager to "descend even to petty personal persecution"<sup>71</sup>. They relished in the opportunity to settle old scores with all their historical neighbors, particularly Hungary. For that matter, they had on-going disputes with the Bulgarian and the Serbs as well. Basically, the fundamental Balkanism of the circumstances the Americans found themselves in was glaring: they "got a clear

insight into the disturbing territorial disputes that separate them all and particularly the Serbs and the Rumanians<sup>72</sup>.

In addition, Romania is heavily dependent on “the peasant classes [that] are simple primitive people, with many of the virtues one would expect to find in such conditions as exist here”<sup>73</sup>. In sharp contrast, the establishment of the country is known to the Americans for working hard to safeguard their own welfare. The trademark behavior of Bucharest-based politicians results in their “aversion for Bratianu, the beetle-browed prime minister of Rumania with the notorious Byzantine background”<sup>74</sup>. As a matter of fact, Bonsal seems to be struck by the looks of Prime Ministers all over the Balkans. The other PM who shares the same conspicuous physiognomy with Bratianu is Stambouloff, the Bulgarian Premier. “Like many other Balkan statesmen”<sup>75</sup>, he peered at American visitors “from under his heavy beetle brows”<sup>76</sup>. The conduct of the Romanian elite on their own playground, in the infamous Bucharest, is a challenge for American envoys who have to deal with duplicitous ministers. For example,

Mr. Schoenfeld told me when I left that in all the time he had been in Roumania, he had never seen M. Bratiano so pleasant and affable as he was with me, and that never before had he made a two-hour call. He said that, on the contrary, the gentlemen in question had been most haughty and arrogant towards all Americans<sup>77</sup>.

When all is said and done, “everything Roumanian makes a sad comparison with Hungarian equivalents”<sup>78</sup>. The two

American eyewitnesses of the way “the New Europe, with its constellation of little states”<sup>79</sup> was being refashioned out of the Europe of empires, downplay the relationship between Romania and Western Europe. Ultimately, they fail to distinguish between the Serbs, the Greeks or the Romanians. Peasants or soldiers, all of the Romanians blend in with the other nations of the Balkans. On its own, this label of ‘the Balkans’ seems to explain why royalty, commoners, the army and the administration all roll into one, creating one perfect nation of “the peninsula whose very name - “the Bword” - became unmentionable for fear of bad luck”<sup>80</sup>. Although both the American writers seem to acknowledge the fact that Romania is caught in-between the “southern” and the “northern subsystem”<sup>81</sup> of the peninsula, the Romanian nationals do not stand out from the many others who fight their wars around there.

All of the people the US military had to face in the East of Europe make the point that America is the benchmark against which they should be judged. This is to say that the Americans and everyone else are poles apart. Occasionally, the two writers discover that Western European nations, as well as Hungary, are nevertheless close allies who deserve the support of America, which is obviously not the case of Romania. Its “coveted oil fields”<sup>82</sup> and Queen Marie, who brought “her undeniable charm to bear upon some of the more susceptible statesmen”<sup>83</sup> seem to be the only two reasons the country could possibly make a mark on the American elite. As a matter of fact, the queen herself agrees on the importance of a sort of preemptive discourse, which shapes desired responses from Western audiences: “When specially

catering for his approval I would present a question to him the wrong way round, which occasionally trapped him into saying what I wanted to hear”<sup>84</sup>.

As they mastered the ropes of dealing with the Balkans, the narrative voices grow increasingly less sympathetic to the plight of the Romanians. Conclusively, the country comes across as yet another borderland area, oriental and somewhat exotic. Furthermore, it is Balkanized and antagonistic to all of its neighbors. Everything leads to the conclusion that Romanians need guidance even to run their own prison camps: “It would be difficult to describe the abject misery of these men and youths [i.e., of the prisoners]”<sup>85</sup>. As for the modern civilization of Romania, “in general the whole country showed that the Roumanians were utterly lacking in system and organization as well as in decency”<sup>86</sup>. In short, the literary image of Romania that emerges in the above-mentioned American memoirs is most consequential to the sense of identity claimed by the Romanians from that moment on. Their judgment of the country and its people was termed in a way that primarily emphasizes the backward state of the Romanian political culture, economy, road network, etc. The American narrators successfully frame the famous lack of political agency displayed by the average ethnic Romanian, while giving the actual account of what Romanian soldiers and politicians look like to people coming from the West. One way or another, the German-born king of Romania, Ferdinand I, and Queen Marie helped American diplomats and servicemen come to terms with the kingdom of Romania. Everything the queen has to say about her country emphasizes the point of situated discursive practices,

which, ultimately, can reveal self-interested attitudes: “I think to-day I have found the angle from which I want to write my story, the angle which represents me in relation to Roumania”<sup>87</sup>.

In the long run, both Bandholtz and Bonsal suspect that the royals acted in cahoots with their subjects when the Romanian army tried to plunder Hungary. As the story goes, the Hohenzollerns of Romania took advantage of the Western elites that were susceptible to the charms and cunning of Queen Victoria’s niece (i.e., Queen Marie of Romania). It seems that all of the Romanians speak foreign languages with this very purpose in mind. They aim to make the country modern, and, while at it, tell those who wield the purse strings what they want to hear.

The main charges brought against the Romanians concern their political culture and, in the words of Queen Marie, the fact that they “in general have a great flow of words at their disposal”<sup>88</sup>. I intend to focus on the afterlife of these ideas in twenty-first century Romanian scholarship on market economy and higher education. The perceived flaws of the European-driven Westernization of Romania are many. They all have to do with the so-called “administrative reform”<sup>89</sup>. Notions of progress, poverty, and social exclusion are at play in the narrative of modernization on Western-made models, which is firmly in the mainstream of Romanian life.

### **A Scenario Turned Real: Post-Communist Romania**

**A** comprehensive discussion of political and education sciences in post-communist Romania is beyond the scope of my

inquiry. My reading of two English-written books, authored by Romanian academics in the fields of education and political sciences, shows that the geohistorical scenario for Romania that American diplomats and servicemen imagined a hundred years ago effectively turned real. The cliché-ridden stories about Eastern peripheries seem to have been staples of Romanian self-identification ever since. The focus on a self-regulating discourse that responds to political circumstances is self-evident as far as twenty-first century Romanian elites are concerned.

Rhetorical commonplaces have not changed much since WWI. On the contrary, they can be traced back to the narrative frames used to describe Romania. They are expressed in the memoirs of Bonsal and Bandholtz as “a technique by which discursive practices are maintained, and if social life largely consists of such practices, it follows that censorship is the norm rather than the exception”<sup>90</sup>. In hindsight, their writing sheds some light on “the role of marginality – conceived of as epistemic category rather than power status”<sup>91</sup>, i.e., on Romanian culture and civilization. The very same frame of reference has re-surfaced from the moment Romania started talks on joining the European Union.

Issues that pertain to administrative reform undergird the narrative of two books that look into the issue of good governance in Romania. *Learning Democracy and Market Economy in Post-Communist Romania* (2012), by Claudiu D. Tufiş, and *Higher Education Reforms in Romania between the Bologna Process and National Challenges* (2015) by Adrian Curaj et al. Except for their availability, I chose them for their particular relevance to “geographies

of peripheralization”<sup>92</sup> as a cultural process in the context of the painful political reforms urged on the post-communist country. They approach social change from the usual angle of EU involvement in Romania. Their main argument rails against the people’s backward views on education and economy, while issuing roughly one and the same call for action on behalf of liberal democracy. Namely, the answer to the predicament of Romania is the Europeanization of politics and education, which can change the country for the better. At stake is the attempt to make the economy, political culture, and schools more compatible with Western standards. At the root of the story are the Romanian readers themselves who have to be literally told what is needed in order to make their country better.

At the same time, the discourse reveals deep disregard for the democratic will of average voters who do not know any better than to succumb to nostalgia for the communist past and the myth of comprehensive social security. Characteristic of Romanian institutional culture, the discourse of Romanian academics and policy-makers is surprisingly similar to that of the Americans who reported back home on interwar Romania a century ago. At the same time, they embrace the notion of national resilience advanced by Queen Marie that “there was still confidence in that look they [the Romanian soldiers] sent me, a sort of dumb trust which suffering and defeat could not uproot”<sup>93</sup>. Discursive self-regulation by self-identified Romanians diffuse discontent from Western observers. This frames criticism of Romania in a positive light and, consequently, “define[s] self-regulation as a social and cultural phenomenon”<sup>94</sup>. Effectively, the natives themselves

explain away the identity of Romania as yet another new nation in the Balkan borderlands. Present-day social and education sciences in Romania perpetuate stereotypes by looking back at:

the symbolic and political boundary processes that have marked out East and West, thereby defining and differentiating Europe, [which] possess not only long histories but durable afterlives. Material processes of peripheralization (economic, political, intellectual) remain one of the most visible of these afterlives<sup>95</sup>.

American views of the Romanian administration delineated two narrative strands: 1. Romania as yet another new nation of the East (of Europe) and 2. the Romanian elites misrepresent the interests of their people.

Adrian Curaj and Claudiu Tufiş address these very same issues. That translates to authors acknowledging their country's backwardness. The assessment of progress on the path of Westernization recognizes the findings of Harry Hill Bandholtz regarding "the characteristic Roumanian style of begging the issue"<sup>96</sup>. Namely, the determination of Romanian officials "to carry on a reprehensible policy of procrastination"<sup>97</sup> is plain to see once again. For example, according to Adrian Curaj, "subterfuge and procrastination"<sup>98</sup> are the pitfalls of reform in Romanian higher education right now. If one is to judge from what Curaj (a former Ministry of Education between the seventeenth of November 2015 and fifth of July 2016) has to say, the self-avowed commitment of the post-communist elite is to make the country modern.

Accordingly, the key feature of good governance is trying to match Romanian responses to the demands of the EU.

The main task at hand is to win the uphill battle against the legacy of the Balkans. At any rate, the authors of both books see themselves as working for the greater good of the nation. Explicitly, political culture and lagging economic growth account for current crises in post-communist Romania, which are symptomatic of underdeveloped democracies.

in Romania, for instance, in 2006 the society was still debating whether the Parliament should have one chamber or two, whether the President should be elected by the people or by the MPs<sup>99</sup>; Romania is still among the countries with the highest rate of risk of poverty and social exclusion in Europe<sup>100</sup>.

The rationale behind academic inquiry is trying to catch up with Western neighbors: lagging behind other nations, the Romanians can definitely use wakeup calls. For example,

Higher Education Evidence Based Policy Making: a necessary premise for progress in Romania, on which the present research volume is based, aims to increase the capacity of public administration for evidence-based policy making in the field of higher education<sup>101</sup>.

These are voices that push for good governance and accountability in politics and education. On the one hand, they "map the ground for a case study of political

culture change during the post-communist transition in Romania<sup>102</sup>. On the other hand, they are meant “to formulate concrete evidence-based policy proposals, which could be transformed into future policy solutions in the Romanian higher education system”<sup>103</sup>. Ultimately, they deal in understatements.

The assessment of current circumstances suggests that nothing much has changed from the time American diplomats and servicemen had to deal with the kingdom of Romania. Both Western observers and local elites share “the objective to reduce the economic and social development disparities between Romania and other EU Member States”<sup>104</sup>. Yet, the circumlocutory style of the Romanian officials in the aftermath of WW I seems to have made quite a comeback a hundred years later:

[it] brought its contribution to grounding Romanian higher education and research policy on solid evidence along the past decade, by enabling both practitioners and policy experts to exchange views in a larger frame of mutual learning and by attracting resources for strategic projects on various strands<sup>105</sup>.

The degree of change brought about by the EU accession is debatable. Everything boils down to finding whether “Romania reached the liberal democracy stage and managed to transform its economic system into a functioning market economy”<sup>106</sup>. As a result of such developments, “since the 1995, Education Law was adopted it passed through continuous amendments thus arriving in 2005 to have more changes

than actual articles”<sup>107</sup>. Factually, the “provisions that targeted the [...] perceived flaws of the Romanian higher education system”<sup>108</sup> have everything to do with the European-driven change to the social and economic environment of post-communist Romania. However, “the reform of the doctoral cycle has not yet been finalized”<sup>109</sup>. Importantly, “the implementation of these regulations was postponed”<sup>110</sup>.

All in all, there is no doubt that the Romanian habit of putting off things dies hard. This time, the deferral of ‘the implementation of the regulations’ is postponed to an indeterminate date:

Looking at the development of the Romanian higher education since 2007, it is evident that a number of reforms were started, but some of them still need development of subsequent legal documents, based on coherent policies and sound research and impact assessments.<sup>111</sup>

The penchant for double talk of the Romanian establishment is here to stay. British scholars of Romanian studies have long noticed the country’s “strategy of duplicity”<sup>112</sup>. The ability of local policy makers to give the appearance of new and improved conduct – by assuming the role of European politicians – is remarkable, if not uncanny. According to Tom Gallagher, this is the reason why the weak (i.e., Romania) vanquished the strong (i.e., the EU). Despite the fact that “the first ten years of transition were characterized by delays in implementing the required reforms, leading to a prolonged economic transition”<sup>113</sup>, things turn out for the best. The learning curve of democracy and market economy

was steep and the EU put the Romanian establishment under undeniable pressure. The public schools system and particularly “university leadership was [...] targeted with these strategic projects”<sup>114</sup>, while “the reports of the EU have constantly given red flags to the justice system for delays in reforming the system and for corruption”<sup>115</sup>.

There is no doubt that Romania is closer than ever to the West. While being upfront about their country’s administration, Romanian scholars tend not to mention the “expiry of reform”<sup>116</sup> in Romania, now a member of the EU. As they see it, the intent to deceive Brussels Eurocrats is one side of the story. This is to say that among the “different groups within the Romanian society”<sup>117</sup>, there are some “crafty natives”<sup>118</sup>. The many “different political cultures in Romania”<sup>119</sup> are reason enough to hope for the best. It follows that branding Romania as deceitful is uncalled for. More likely, periphrasis and self-censorship are sense-making practices that set up binary oppositions between ‘us’ and ‘them’. As the natives make sense of what they are expected to deliver, they safeguard national interest whether through subversive commentary or action.

The fact of the matter is that the country has a history of receiving mixed messages from the West. Progress in clamping down on corruption is in the spotlight, while poor administrative capacity is believed to have always harmed Romanian citizens ever since market economy and free elections took over from the totalitarian regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu. Conclusively, the duplicitous nature of Romanian politics is something all concerned parties seem willing to accept. Consequently, the nation seems to have made its way out

from the traditional buffer zone between the West and the East. Despite being the “successful laggard of the enlargement process”<sup>120</sup>, Romania was brought into the fold of the EU in 2007. There is not much of a doubt that both the US and the EU used to be mostly comfortable with the Romanian elites. Early twentieth century memoirs as well as current political science books make the point that the West can definitely work with the establishment of Romania. As such, alongside other Eastern European countries, Romania “not only legitimised Western superiority, but also fostered the same Orientalism that affected themselves as Balkan, not Christian enough, or not white enough”<sup>121</sup>.

This narrative is meant for an English-speaking public in ways that reveal the cross-fertilization between the modes of narration employed by mainstream storytelling in Romanian and English respectively. Importantly, the flow of this conversation is ultimately determined by Romanian authors that claim to gear their books toward English-speaking natives and implicate colonial meanings tied to the past of Romania. In turn, this helps making sense of present-day concerns about the country as a full-fledged member of the EU. Finally, English essentially closes the average Romanian off from the above-mentioned material processes of peripheralization (that they nevertheless are subject to).

### **Named in Periphrasis: Romania Then and Now**

**A**s far as the so-called ‘Western’ world is concerned, documentary texts published in English have likely contributed

to understanding Romania - and Romania's backwardness - as being rooted in the Balkans. Moreover, they can be construed as having great cultural impact on the way local self-identification is expressed in English. As a means to overcome real and perceived difficulties related to all aspects of peripheralization in Romania, the imperative of catching up with the West has everything to do with the discourse of teaching and learning about the Balkans across the English-speaking world. Ever since the birth of the modern nation state, this goal has been a buzzword in Romanian mainstream politics.

The drive to make the country modern is a process conducive to mutual learning between native and non-native speakers of English. As for postcolonial sensibilities, they come with the territory of speaking and writing English. Postcolonial readings of Romanian identity narratives have gained traction by drawing attention to the overlap between local and global histories, much like Romanian social sciences in English are doing in order to expand what is known about Romania. Unambiguously, such narratives hinge on self-conscious peripheralization in relation to the West. It follows that discursive practices meant to preempt criticism of local elites are culturally situated on the perceived divide between East and West.

Effectively, the memoir genre proves the effectiveness of ready-made phrases in garnering the support of English-speaking Romanians for the way the West looks at their country. Practically, their view boils down to narrative frames that confirm both the country (and most of its people) actually belong to the wider context of the Balkans. Importantly, the postcolonial

understandings of Romania have already begun to emerge into public view and are now trickling down to popular consciousness, reaching across foreign languages (English, French, etc.) and in the every-day lives of the locals. Lately, revealing the colonial underpinnings of present-day Romania is a self-confirming prophecy.

To some extent, present-day Romanian academics and policy-makers impersonate the point-of-view character in the narration of Bandholtz and Bonsal. Their memoirs, as early examples of English-written Romanian studies, associate Romania with the Balkans so that American audiences (businessmen, diplomats, etc.) would gain a better grasp of this relatively new country on the map. Alongside authorship and what is actually communicated, the target audience should explain the enduring appeal of some circular narratives about the Romanian people: somewhat strange and vindictive, they do not show much political agency collectively in "the characteristic Roumanian style of begging the issue"<sup>122</sup>. Just emerging from a mythic past, the nation hardly had time to make up for lack of agency in history. These rather oppressive and totalizing stories are being reproduced by local authors who write as if they have assumed the perspective of Bandholtz and Bonsal. As such, their narratives come across as forms of "internal orientalism"<sup>123</sup>. Their writing nevertheless takes things to the next level of circumlocution. Cautiously, they convey unpleasant information with the help of a broad variety of periphrastic structures, which reveal more than political purposes: discursive self-regulation allows for exaggerated claims of accuracy when it comes to describing Romanian character by Western observers. Linguistic meanings speak volumes about

the story of Romania as “a world of permanent improvisations, of temporary solutions and provisional arrangements”<sup>124</sup>. From the moment the state of the nation was reported in English, memoirs proposed a framework easily understood by both natives and Western representatives. Alongside lack of political agency, it incorporated the image of crafty locals into processes of peripheralization (as an inherently Romanian trait). One way or another, underhand scheming, procrastination and, generally, the devious ways of the local establishment come to the fore as well. Then and now, Byzantine ambiguity accounts for the status of Romania as a peripheral European country, which, anyway, fared much better than expected. Surprisingly, in the aftermath of WWI, it “was rewarded somewhat lavishly for being an unreliable ally of the Western allies”<sup>125</sup>; membership of the EU in 2007 is yet another case in point of how, allegedly, the weak (i.e., Romania) got their way with the strong (i.e., the EU).

Ultimately, my primary sources point to an increase in the use of narrative frames and stock images that establish a connection between theorizing from the fringes of Western civilization (i.e., current Romanian social science) and early twentieth century memoirs about the Kingdom of Romania and Hungary. This approach attests to an act of appropriation on the part of Romanian writers in English. This

self-aware appropriation of colonial tradition, within the boundaries of a culture that otherwise carefully extricated itself from the burden of postcolonial critique, comes across as a second order discourse on the “colonization of the imagination of the dominated”<sup>126</sup>. This is achieved by means of seeking approval from Western envoys or, at least, avoiding their overt disapproval. If written in English, books authored by Romanian academics in the fields of social and education sciences are making extensive use of rhetorical commonplaces that (mis)quote documentary writing about the Kingdom of Romania struggling on its way to becoming another lesser form of Western civilization. Ever since, denouncing self-interested and corrupt behaviour has stayed with Romanian speakers of English as a form of pre-emptive communication that, ultimately, advances their agenda. The many warnings against local elites bring up the possibility that bad governance is felt to be a comfortable topic for the Romanian themselves, not only for Western observers.

In the long run, the representatives of the English-speaking world and the decision makers of Romania seem to have outwitted each other by mutual consent. In fact, they succeed in playing down expectations about what can be actually achieved on the ground, i.e. in Romania. The purpose seems to have been preventing a sense of frustration to set in.

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