

Identity Discourse in the Public Sphere and the Image of the Other

Daniela Maria MARȚOLE

Ștefan cel Mare University of Suceava, Romania

daniela.martole@usv.ro

Abstract: This paper explores the ways in which the Romanian collective identity is constructed in the public sphere through linguistic and discursive strategies. The stereotypical construction of group identity in the media shapes the public representation of *the in-group* and political actors contribute to the marginalisation of *the Other*, influencing public attitudes, altering identity narratives and keeping individuals trapped in a sterile binarism thus revealing underlying ideological structures and power dynamics.

Keywords: *imagined communities, national identity, discursive strategies, public sphere, public discourse.*

1. Introduction

The present article dwells on the ways in which contextual factors that place individuals inside or outside certain groups trigger regroupings and transformations in the identity discourse and in the representation of the Other. The research explores two moments in the recent history of the Romanians, the 2014 UKIP warning against “organised criminal gangs from Romania” and Nigel Farage’s declarations, on the one hand, and the 2020 scandal of racism in Ditrău, an ethnically Hungarian locality in Eastern Transylvania, Romania, on the other hand. The two examples will illustrate ways in which notions of ingroup and outgroup shift their meaning, according to the political centers and national barriers used as reference points.

2. Identity, Nation, Migration, Nationalism

According to Baycroft, “nations are conceptual, emotional, abstract entities which may be associated with a state, but can only be grasped through their representations, symbols and the understanding of those who consider themselves to belong to the nation” (2012: 3). Given their abstract nature, the characteristics of nations are subjected to diachronic and diatopic variation and to the subjective perception of individuals that are either inside or outside that national community. That is why, Baycroft argues, nations acquire a fundamentally mythical quality, in the sense that they rely on the symbolism of two key elements, the imagined community and *the invented tradition* (dwelling on the concept developed by Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger in

the volume with the same title). According to Ashcroft, the concept of tradition enables researchers to place the actors involved in relevant contexts that explain their actions:

The grammar of our concepts presupposes that individuals are socialized into traditions which they use to make sense of the world, and to respond purposefully to the dilemmas they encounter when acting in it. Traditions help individuals to organize their beliefs (more or less) coherently, and therefore enable purposive action. By placing historical actors within particular traditions we are able to link their beliefs, desires, and actions in a way that explains their behaviour rather than simply describing it. (Ashcroft 2021: 118)

The community is imagined, as given individuals, in spite of not being able to identify each member of the group they belong to, picture the nation as an extended community, while the invented tradition is generally related to the efforts of an elite to attach national symbolic meanings to elements of culture which, in turn, will aggregate the group of individuals by giving them a sense of tradition and shared values.

UKIP and Nigel Farage claimed that such tradition and shared values and even the British safety was under threat because of Romanian migrants, whom one would not feel at ease to have as neighbours. Paterson and Karyotis (2022) explore British migration policies in an attempt to define the legitimate British identity and what is perceived as threatening to it. In their analysis, the tradition of British tolerance is threatened either by migration or by the society's intolerant response to migration (Paterson & Karyotis 2022: 111):

To be explicit, the label of 'tolerance' is utilized for simplicity, but here tolerance captures a broader notion of positive identity, rooted in contemporary and historic kindness, compassion and hospitality, as well as a sense of democratic decency. Our analysis revealed two 'tolerance' frames ('we are tolerant, they are intolerant' and 'we are tolerant, they make us intolerant') that are securitising in nature. However, it also identified a third *counter-securitising* 'tolerance' frame ('we are tolerant, we need to remain tolerant'), highlighting threats to identity in order to resist – rather than reinforce – the securitisation of migration. (Paterson & Karyotis 2022: 112)

The title of Paterson and Karyotis 's scientific research, "We are, by nature, a tolerant people", echoes the 2014 immigration speech of Liberal Democrat Nick Clegg regarding Britain's historic tolerance and generosity in which he pleads for an immigration system that is zero tolerant of abuse: "People's anxieties are not, generally-speaking, driven by prejudice or racism. We are, by nature, a tolerant people. But for too long, British people's legitimate concerns have been downplayed" (Paterson & Karyotis 2022: 114). Nick Clegg's and other politicians' speeches (such as that of the Conservative Party leader, then Prime Minister, David Cameron, or Labour leader Ed Milliband) are included by Paterson and Karyotis in the same rhetorical frame, 'we are tolerant, they make us intolerant'. However, the reactions of the same politicians at Nigel Farrage's comments about the Romanian immigrants, recorded by bbc.com on May 18, 2014 ("Nigel Farrage attacked over the Romanians 'slur'") would qualify for the inclusion in the third 'tolerance' frame

(‘we are tolerant, we need to remain tolerant’). For Keith Vaz, chairman of the Home Affairs Committee, Farage’s words echoed abusive reactions at the Asian communities in the sixties. The political mobilisation of national phobias (Beller 2007: 51) through violent generalisations and prejudice might create a social divide that may be threatening the British identity. While Farage’s views are considered ‘nasty’ or ‘unpleasant’, their linguistic packaging is more strongly criticised: “This is just not the language that we should be involved in” (Keith Vas), “Yes, we want to have a controlled immigration system; yes, we want to sort out the welfare system, but we shouldn’t put these labels on as UKIP do” (David Cameron). In the introduction to the volume *Language and Identity*, David Evans claims that language and discourse can bring about the emancipation of marginalised cultures:

Discourse can therefore go beyond the interactional, constructing larger-scale meanings at sociocultural and sociopolitical levels. Language is then a ‘double-edged sword’; constraining identity by erecting boundaries between ‘them and us’ be they geographical or sociocultural, and liberating identity by offering fresh opportunities to cross barriers and boundaries. (Evans 2016: 4).

Language, therefore, is a powerful tool and it plays a central role in legitimizing political stances and in shaping collective belonging, as both Romania and UK were at the time members of the European Union. In this adversarial us/them frame, Romanians are clearly the outgroup, perceived as a threat, while the ingroup is in its turn divided by conflictual modes of self-representation. Krishan Kumar considers that the difficulty in finding national self-definition resides in the English reluctance to acknowledge the existence of an English nationalism, reflected even in the scarcity of scholarly literature on the topic:

The idea that nationalism is something pathological, something at the same time deeply foreign, is part of the English understanding of it. Hence the unwillingness to accept that there is or can be such a thing as English nationalism. Even those who are prepared to accept the idea of English (or British) nationalism tend to point to its peculiarity (Kumar 2006: 20).

Kumar (2006: 272) also mentions the long history of undeniable openness to new peoples, cultures and ideas, a similar narrative with the one promoted by David Cameron’s reaction against Farage’s racial slurs: “I just hope people will look at this and recognise that we are an open, tolerant, compassionate country.” (bbc.com, May 18, 2014). However, the portrayal of Romanians as criminally dangerous is not new in the British space. In 2013, only one year before the Farage episode, Drace-Francis (2013: 234) writes about Norman Davies’s encyclopaedic work of over 1300 pages, *Europe*, in which Romania is remembered for “Dracula, the Iron Guard, a folkloric death wish, Nicolae Ceausescu and Stephen the Great”, for having a “dubious record” and for “acting as mediator between other Mafia gangs”. Drace-Francis goes on to say that such “untinking generalisations” are not uncommon in the British history writing, and points out that while such views are “more prevailing in the

intellectual circuit of British public opinion”, the general market tends to produce a less biased image.

Tajfel (1970) considered that intergroup discrimination characterize most modern societies in very similar ways, and he performed an experiment to prove that the constitution of the ingroup and of the outgroup that is perceived as different is irrelevant. He presented the stereotypical description applied in Slovenia, the richest constituent republic of Yugoslavia, to immigrant Bosnians from poorer regions, to a group of students at Oxford and they identified it as a situation between native Englishman and Asian immigrants. On the same note, McCrone (2015: 141) claims that all forms of social identity involve “‘othering’ the positing of a notional other against whom one compares the nature and strength of one’s own identity. Often this involves ruling out who you are not”.

3. The Ditrău Episode

On January 26, 2020, just a few days before UK’s exit from the European Union (partly due to EU’s migration policies), in Ditrău, Harghita County, Romania, about 300 hundred people protested against the hiring of two foreign workers brought from Sri Lanka at the local bakery. The incident immediately received its own Wikipedia page, under the title *Incidentul xenofob din comuna Ditrău (2020)* [The xenophobic incident in Ditrău (2020)] and widespread national and international coverage. The locals expressed their fears about economic insecurities, which seemed to be the starting point of the protest, but went on to display anxieties about loss of identity and cultural and demographic change. The episode sparked a national debate on issues of discrimination and immigration in Romania.

What is interesting for the purpose of this article, is the simultaneously double positioning of the Ditrău community as both an outgroup and an ingroup. As a 98% Hungarian community, it places itself outside the Romanian authority, if we only take into account the The National Assembly of the Szeklers, meeting on June 18, 2006, in Ditrău, with the purpose to proclaim the right to self-determination of the Szekler people, an integral part of the Hungarian nation (Lăcătușu 2020: 100). At the same time, many people in the community choose to fight economic insecurities by becoming immigrants in European countries (Anastasiu 2020) that can offer better salaries than their rural community, exposing themselves to discriminating attitudes. At the same time, they form a very conservative ingroup, more as Hungarian ethnics than as Romanian citizens, following the anti-immigration policies and ideologies of political leaders in Hungary.

Isolationism, can however, be, a Romanian trait as well. Historian Lucian Boia considers that, sometimes, Romanians feel overwhelmed by foreign models and, consequently,

turn to the preservation of their indigenous identity, as a means of self-defence. Some Romanians look towards Europe, while others do not want to look outside at all. This tension between Europeanism and autochthonism illustrates an intellectual polarisation that is typical of Romanian society. The confrontation between these two opposing tendencies has accompanied the process of modernisation over the last two centuries. (Boia 2001: 14).

Romanian authorities and leaders of the Hungarian minority in Romania condemned the outburst of intolerance and racial discrimination. According to Tajfel,

discrimination, it is often said, is more directly a function of the objective social situation, which sometimes does and sometimes does not facilitate the expression of attitudes; the attitudes of prejudice may be socially learned or due to tendencies to conform, but they are not a very efficient predictor of discriminatory behavior. (Tajfel 1970: 96).

McCrone (2015: 143-144), argues that only when they have an impact on social behavior do cultural differences create ethnic boundaries, only then do they become “routinised shortcuts to focus perception and, ultimately, action”. Almost three years after the incident, two researchers affiliated to the National Institute for the Study of Minority Issues in Romania went back to Ditrău, as the community expressed concerns about the distorted local perspective propagated by the press. They claimed that the few racial views expressed by several members of the community should not have been enough to stigmatise the entire population as racist:

Our criticism of the press is that it took a few statements, such as “Our community is more conservative and does not really accept those who come from outside the country, especially those with dark skin,” and used them so many times that it ended up homogenizing a national, linguistic, and ethnic minority. As if everyone were saying and doing the same thing (cited in Han 2023).

This episode and its media coverage bring forth the concept of *public sphere*, as conceptualized by Habermas (2006: 415-416). Habermas identifies two types of actors that make the public sphere functional: on the one hand, media professionals, journalists that archive news, reports and commentaries, and, on the other hand, politicians that are the receivers and also the coproducers of public opinion. The public sphere, placed at the periphery of the political system, accommodates various types of messages that carry informative, polemical, educational or entertaining content that reaches overlapping audiences.

In the two cases analysed in this article, both discourses are enrooted in the stereotypical adversary “us” vs. “them” populist frame. For Farage and his party, targeting Romanian was part of a broader, anti-immigration and anti-European platform. In Romania, the anti-immigration attitudes of the minority group in Ditrău were fueled by economic fears and identity issues.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anastasiu 2020: Dragoș Anastasiu, “Ditrău, pericol sau oportunitate? Ce cred oamenii când aud de forță de muncă din străinătate”, în *Republica*, 4 februarie.
- Andreescu 2013: Florentina C. Andreescu, *From Communism to Capitalism: Nation and State in Romanian Cultural Production*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Akram 2024: Sadiya Akram, “Dear British politics – where is race and racism?”, in *British Politics*, 19, pp. 1-24, available online: <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41293-023-00224-3>.

- Anderson 2006 (1983): Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London and New York, Verso.
- Ashcroft 2021: Richard T. Ashcroft & Mark Bevir, "Brexit and the Myth of British National Identity", in *British Politics*, 16, pp. 117-132, available online: <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41293-021-00167-7>.
- Baycroft 2012: Timothy Baycroft & Hopkin, David. eds. *Folklore and Nationalism in Europe During the Long Nineteenth Century*, Leiden and Boston, Brill.
- Beller 2007: Manfred Beller & Joep Leerssen, (eds.), *Imagology. The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters – A Critical Survey*, Amsterdam and New York, Rodopi.
- Boia 2001: Lucian Boia, *Romania, Borderland of Europe*, London, Reaktion Books.
- Chassy 2016: Phillipe Chassy, "How Language shapes Social Perception", in David Evans (ed.), *Language and Identity. Discourse in the World*, London & New York, Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 36-51.
- Drace-Francis 2013: Alex Drace-Francis, *The Traditions of Invention: Romanian Ethnic and Social Stereotypes in Historical Context*, Leiden & Boston, Brill.
- Evans 2016 (2015): David Evans (ed.), *Language and Identity. Discourse in the World*, London & New York, Bloomsbury Academic.
- Fairclough 2012: Isabelle Fairclough & Norman Fairclough, *Political Discourse Analysis*, London & New York, Routledge.
- Habermas 2006: Jurgen Habermas, "Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research", in *Communication Theory*, 16, pp. 411-426.
- Han 2023: Iulia Han, „Măini negre pe pâine albă”: doi cercetători construiesc o altă imagine a scandalului xenofob din Ditrău și susțin că „presa a redus la tăcere perspectiva locală”, in PressOne, 28 noiembrie.
- Hobsbawm 2000: Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780. Programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge University Press.
- Hofmann 2023: Michael Hofmann, *Reading Habermas: Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Lanham, Boulder, New York and London, Lexington Books.
- Kumar 2006 (2003): Krishan Kumar, *The Making of British National Identity*, Cambridge University Press.
- Lăcătușu 2020: Ioan Lăcătușu & Vasile Stancu, "Mass-media maghiară, din spațiul central european, privind problematica Tratatului de la Trianon (4 iunie 1920)", în *Polis. Revistă de Științe politice*, Volum VIII, Nr. 2 (28), Serie nouă, martie-mai, pp. 97-119.
- McCrone 2015: David McCrone & Franck Bechhofer, *Understanding National Identity*, Cambridge University Press.
- Paterson 2022: Ian Paterson, Georgios Karyotis, "We are, by nature, a tolerant people': Securitisation and counter-securitisation in UK migration politics" in *International Relations*, Vol. 36(1) 104-126
- Roman 2020: Mihai Roman, "UDMR, poziție oficială față de scandalul xenofob din Ditrău: Nu putem accepta incitarea la ură împotriva unor oameni de o altă culoare", in G4Media, 31 ianuarie.
- Tajfel 1970: Henry Tajfel, "Experiments in Intergroup Discrimination", in *Scientific American*, 223 (5), pp. 96-102.