

THE DOUBLE-SIDED MIRROR: A REFLEXIVE APPROACH TO THE ROMANIANS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS IMMIGRANTS

GABRIELA DUMBRAVĂ*

ABSTRACT: *Starting from the premise that our perception of reality is largely determined by our psychological and cultural background, the paper analyzes the reflexive nature of the Romanians' attitude towards immigrants, attempting to show the extent to which their own outsider experience in the Western societies shapes a particular way in which they perceive immigrants. Thus, the metaphor of the double-sided mirror is used to illustrate the psychological barrier raised by historical trauma, by virtue of which the Romanians may regard the other as a potential threat as a result of a defense mechanism triggered by their own status as migrants.*

KEY-WORDS: *double-sided mirror, emigrants, immigrants, migration, host, guest, the other, hospitality.*

JEL CLASSIFICATION: *Z13.*

1. ROMANIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY FROM A HISTORICAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

1.1. The historical perspective

Situated at the intersection between the East and the West, the Romanian cultural space has been constantly shaped throughout its history by the fundamental tension between its Balkan heritage and the fascination for the civilization of Western Europe. This clash between these two incongruous dimensions has fostered an identity crisis with a decisive impact on the Romanians' self-perception and, implicitly, on their attitude towards otherness and their diversity management skills.

Thus, as historian Adrian Marino shows, the successive Roman, Ottoman, Austrian-Hungarian and Russian colonization throughout Romania's history has

* *Assoc. Prof., Ph.D., The University of Petroșani, Romania, gbrldumbrava@yahoo.com*

developed a defense mechanism driven by exacerbated nationalism, which includes the idealization of our Thracian – Dacian origins, the proclamation of rural idyllic civilization as the unique genuine source of spiritual values in opposition with the corrupting urban space. Nicolae Ceaușescu's totalitarian regime further inflated national pride, largely relying on the thesis of the capitalist threat and to justify its isolationist policy.

Under the circumstances, the opening of the Romanian borders in 1989 found the Romanian society totally unprepared for the profound changes brought about by the European models. As a result, the identity crisis deepened alongside with the confusion generated by the rapid economic, social and political change. After fifty years of totalitarianism, the shock of freedom determined an undiscerning adoption of Western models, often entirely incompatible with our national background and with our social and economic reality.

Romania's admission to the EU in 2007 extended the embracing of Western institutions and values, automatically assumed to be superior, and further enhanced the tension between the desire to integrate in the EU and the need to preserve national identity.

Ultimately, this cleavage deepened our identity crisis as a nation and reinforced what Daniel David identifies as our historical sense of inadequacy, based on the way in which we project ourselves in relationship with the others: "our self-image as the disadvantaged of history is the one that triggers our defensive behavior, which further deepens the discrepancy between aspiration and reality and traps us in a vicious circle of increasing uncertainty and restlessness" (David 2015, p. 315)

1.2. The psychological and cultural perspective

At the turn of the twentieth century, Romanian social psychologist Dumitru Drăghicescu publishes a study entitled *On the Psychology of the Romanian People* (1907), centered on the idea that the Romanians' psychological profile was shaped at the intersection of Western and Eastern and cultures. At the same time, he acknowledges the role of the successive dominations by foreign cultures in the formation of such characteristics as:

- "the laziness of the spirit [...], self-doubt, passivity, resignation, faith in destiny and luck, and fatalism" all of Byzantine origin;
- the mentality of 'the unfinished' and the temporary, which he explains by the permanent threat of invasions;
- a resistance to due to a lack of orientation towards the future;
- "a bitter, destructive critical spirit" (Drăghicescu 2013, pp. 349, 447, 535).

Two decades later, psychologist and sociologist Constantin Rădulescu-Motru notices roughly the same psychological traits of the Romanian people, but holds that, besides the historic events, the predominantly rural forms of social organization had an important role in the emergence of such characteristics as a strong herd instinct, the lack of tenacity and the tendency to improvise (Rădulescu-Motru 2012, pp. 23-30).

In the 1960s of last century, Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede sets forth his cultural dimensions theory, according to which the system of values in any society,

as well as the patterns of thought and behavior, are shaped by six cultural dimensions, namely: individualism vs. collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, masculinity vs. femininity, long-term vs short-term orientation, and indulgence vs. restraint (Hofstede 2001).

Applied to the Romanian society, Hofstede's model reveals the following dimensions of our cultural identity:

- High power distance, associated with the acceptance of hierarchy on grounds of fear rather than conviction, and a strong aversion towards authority;
- Collectivism, which excludes individual self-assertion and independence in favor of the need to belong to a group and the reliance on inherited assets rather than on the effort to achieve new ones.
- High uncertainty avoidance, which results in a low capacity to cope with ambiguity and diversity, alongside with resistance to change and reluctance to long-term decisions.
- Intermediate long-term/short-term orientation, which means an ambiguous position between past oriented, traditionalist societies resistant to change, and the societies focused primarily on present change as source of future progress.
- Relative feminism, by virtue of which the Romanians culture prefer immediate comfort to the detriment of competitiveness, personal achievement and social status.
- Restraint, which refers to emphasis on day-to-day subsistence rather than on the emotional and spiritual needs, fostering a cynical and pessimistic mentality (Hofstede 2001). which is a common feature of the former communist countries, where the frustrations of the oppressive regimes left long-lasting scars on the people's mentality.

In his 2015 book *The Psychology of the Romanian People*, Daniel David detects the following dimensions of the Romanians' cultural profile, which he attributes to the country's historical evolution as:

- competitiveness generated not by the need for self-assertion, but by the frustration of not getting what they think they deserve;
- gregarious spirit and high emotionality;
- low level of conscientiousness, indiscipline and breaking of social rules;
- defensive attitude generated by low self-esteem and inferiority complexes;
- low level of autonomy, determination and tenacity in completing begun projects;
- skepticism, cynicism, oblivion, and lack of trust in people (David 2015, p. 306).

By corroborating the findings of the literature presented above, it becomes clear that the fundamental features in the Romanians' cultural profile persist well into the 21st century and continue to shape both their self-perception and their perception of diversity.

Moreover, the past three decades have witnessed a constant deepening of the identity crisis brought about by the events in 1989, which marked the transition from totalitarian communism to European capitalism. It is well known that the communist

regime was marked by the tension between the nationalism and the defensive attitude towards ‘the Western imperialist enemy’ promoted in the totalitarian propaganda and people’s intimate, subversive fascination and longing for ‘the better West’. The 1989 Revolution did not provide a space for graduate transition by adaptation, but acted as a shockwave that shattered the previous system of values, leaving behind a void that consolidated the Romanians’ in-between mentality. In the aftermath of the fall of totalitarianism, due to people’s impulsive need to break away from the past, the myth of ‘the better other’ prevailed in the collective mentality, so that former nationalism was replaced by an equally biased pseudo-cosmopolitanism, on grounds of which everything coming from the ‘civilized countries’ was considered superior. This preconception, together with a national inferiority complex acquired by superficial comparison, led to an undiscerning adoption of foreign models to be forced upon every level of the Romanian society with disastrous immediate and long-term effects.

The immediate effects of this fundamental mismatch were the deterioration of national economy with dramatic social implications, the decrease of people’s confidence in the state institutions and an increasing sense of alienation. The precarious economic and social context triggered the massive Romanian migration to the West, whose economic, social and cultural impact on our society is still overwhelming.

This is the period when the Romanian emigrant emerges as an average, former middle-class individual sentenced to poverty by the collapse of the national industry and agriculture and forced to leave their country in search for a decent income. The separation from their familiar environment and the perception of the native country as the source of economic and emotional frustrations constantly blur the sense of belonging into a mere feeling of nostalgia for the good old times, whereas national pride is eroded by the hostility and suspicion with which they are regarded in the host countries. In this context, the power relations established between the Romanian emigrants and their hosts are supported from three directions, namely: how the others see us (the uncivilized, unruly Easterners who disrupt social order and steal the natives’ jobs), how we see the others (the civilized nations that can offer better life conditions and opportunities) and how we see ourselves (marginal citizens of Europe, victims of a tyrannical or oblivious regimes, uprooted by the need to provide a better future for the next generations).

In support of the above an extensive study carried out by psychologist Daniel David reveals the influence of how the others see us on our self-perception starting from the observation that “the Western Europeans and the Americans tend to view us less positively than we see them, most often based on limited experience and the need to justify their present attitude towards us” (Davis 2015, p.314). On the other hand, based on a series of surveys, the researcher detects a negative influence of the Western European stereotypical perception of the former communist countries on the Romanians’ self-perception in the sense of undermining their self-confidence and fostering a tendency towards national self – denigration. Thus, the surveys revealed that although the Romanians consider themselves not only friendly, hospitable, intelligent, emotional, and resilient, but also “cynical and indifferent, less civilized in comparison with other peoples, gregarious, undisciplined, obedient and yielding to external influence” (David 2015, p.311).

As the following sections will show, the intersection between hetero-stereotypes and self-stereotypes generates a specific Romanian attitude towards diversity, in which the perception of alterity is actually a reflection of our national crisis-ridden identity.

2. THE INFLUENCE OF THE DIASPORA EXPERIENCE ON ROMANIAN HOSPITALITY

2.1. The diaspora experience

The diaspora experience refers to the economic, social, cultural and emotional implications of the migration process, as well as to the challenges of reassessing such concepts as belonging and national identity as part of the process of integration into a new environment.

As far as Romanian migration is concerned, the process started immediately after the opening of the country's borders in 1989 and has been going on, with different amplitude, for almost four decades. The destination countries have also changed in different migration periods, namely: Germany, Hungary and Israel where the respective ethnic groups migrated at the beginning of 1990; the United States and Canada during the late 1990s; and other EU countries, such as Italy, Spain, Germany and the United Kingdom, where massive migration was motivated by job seeking or study purposes.

As statistics show, migration has evolved into a major social and economic phenomenon in Romania, accounting for more than 75% of the population decline from 22.4 million in 2000 to 19.5 million in 2018. Between 2015 and 2016, 17% of all people born in Romania were living in OECD countries, while Romania "had the highest emigration rate among the ten main origin countries of emigrants living in OECD countries". Another relevant fact is that, in the same period, Romania's emigrant population is much larger than that of neighbouring countries (Moldova, Bulgaria, Serbia, Hungary and Ukraine), as "Romanian emigrants alone accounted for almost half of the 7.8 million emigrants from this region". Moreover, migration flows from Romania to OECD rose by nearly 60% between 2009 and 2016. (OECD Report, 2019).

Once arrived in their host countries, the Romanian immigrants had to face both the challenges of separation from their home country and families, but also the hostility of the native populations who regarded them as a threat, based on the prejudices pertaining to the East-West stereotypical perceptions. Thus, in the Western mind, the immigrants from the former communist countries were automatically associated with backwardness, indiscipline, corruption and dishonesty. Consequently, the immigrants learned the hard way that their own perception of the West as the land of promise was equally stereotypical, and realized that the price of a better income was much higher than expected.

Studies show point out that the negative perception of the Romanian immigrants, largely supported by the mass-media, determine the following three types of attitude of the natives towards them, namely: stigmatization, particularly in Italy and Spain, where Romanian immigrants are labelled as "uncivilized" or "thieves"; marginalization and social exclusion due to the large influx of migrants, particularly in the late 2000s; discrimination based on their country of origin (Balcanu 2010, pp. 9-10).

A disturbing detail to be discussed at this point is that, even when they acknowledge that the Romanians are hardworking, resilient and tenacious people, the hosts refer to them by using such condescending, impersonal labels as the *strawberry pickers* or the *badanti*, which are often accompanied by degrading work and living conditions, humiliations and poor payment.

Under the circumstances, the diaspora experience, especially in the first years after Romania's accession to the EU, had a traumatic component that marked the first generation of immigrants in the sense of impairing their capacity to manage diversity and to establish open, unbiased relations with people from different cultures. While the second generation of immigrants have taken a crucial step forward in the direction of social and cultural integration, being born and educated in the host countries, their parents will most likely remain mentally captive in the in-between space.

2.2. The Romanians' attitude towards immigrants

The economic and political changes in the global environment during the past two decades have turned Romania from a major source of workforce migration into a destination for non-EU immigrants. This section is centered on the reflexive nature of the Romanians' hospitality, showing how their own traumatic immigrant experience shapes the way in which they behave as hosts of people coming from different cultures.

As it follows from the statistics mentioned before, the huge migration flow to the West after Romania's integration into the EU has brought about dramatic changes in the entire Romanian society in the following directions:

- **demographic** - a dramatic population decrease from 23.2 mil in 1990 to 21.6 mil in 2002 and 19.06 mil in 2024, a rapid population aging, having in view that most of the migrants were working - age people, as well as irreversible depopulation, especially in monoindustrial and rural areas (https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/field/publicatii/anuarul_demografic_al_romaniei_2024_1.pdf);
- **economic** - the collapse of the labor market due to a massive shortage of both highly skilled professionals (physicians, engineers, IT professionals) and unskilled workforce;
- **social** – the “left behind child” syndrome, referring to the severe emotional and psychological distress of children separated from their parents and left in the care of relatives, with long-term impact on their school performance and social skills;
- **cultural** – changes in the system of values under the influence of the cultures of host countries.

The massive Romanian migration that started in 1990 and reached its peak in the years after the country's accession to the EU has created a growing workforce void that called for a reverse flow meant to compensate the labor shortage in such fields as construction, retail, hospitality, agriculture, IT and healthcare. Thus, the urgent need to sustain its economic activity has turned the country into a destination for foreign labor from non-EU countries, especially from South Asia (Nepal, Sri Lanka, Vietnam and India).

At this point, the central question to be answered is: *In what way does the Romanians' diaspora experience in Western Europe influence their way of perceiving the immigrants entering the country?*

Thus, a series of surveys conducted on people from different age categories and social environments led to the conclusion that the Romanians are generally tolerant or neutral towards immigrants, especially because they tend to consider the incoming foreign workforce as beneficial for the national economy. In this sense, a recent INSCOP survey reveals that two-thirds of the respondents consider that the incoming foreigners support the Romanian economy either by filling in the positions vacated as a result of our conationals' migration to the West, or by taking jobs refused by the locals for different reasons. The survey also reveals that young people with higher or medium education and the residents of urban areas display the most favorable attitude towards immigrants, whereas people with primary education and those living in rural areas are more in favor of a state policy meant to encourage the return of Romanians who left the country in search of a better living. It is also worth noticing that, although over 70% of the interviewees do not perceive immigrants as a threat, the findings of the survey still point to a certain amount of skepticism towards foreigners, since 25.1% of Romanians believe that immigrants represent more of a threat because they take the jobs of Romanians who are forced to go abroad (<https://www.romania-insider.com/romaniana-immigrants-helping-economy-survey-2024#>)

Another INSCOP survey reveals that over 40% of the respondents view immigrants from the Middle East as a threat to national security, expressing concerns related to illegal immigration, and being strongly against migrant settlement. Once again, the younger generations manifest more tolerance and tend to emphasize the economic advantages of migration: only 18% of people aged between 18 and 29 regard Middle Easterners as a threat, the percentage increasing with the age category as it follows: 21% for 30 – 44 year olds, 24% for 45 – 59 year olds, 28% for people over 60. The level of education is another determining factor of the degree of tolerance, since Middle East immigrants are regarded as threatening by 26% of people with primary education, 23% of people with secondary education and 22% of people with higher education. The urban – rural distinction is also present, with a total of 76% of Bucharest and big urban areas residents being against the settlement of Middle East immigrants, whereas 22% of rural residents, obviously less affected by the phenomenon, manifest a positive or neutral attitude.

A special case of incoming migration is that of the war refugees from the Ukraine, who are regarded by the interviewed population as it follows: 21.1% of the respondents think that people from the Ukraine represent a big threat for Romania, while 16.4% consider them to be a small threat, and 35.2% that they are no threat. Analysing the situation from the age group perspective, 17% of the respondents aged between 18 and 29 perceive the Ukrainians as a threat to the Romanian society, with considerable increase in the other age groups (26% of 30 – 44 year olds, 21% of 45 – 59 year olds, and 20% of people over 60). From the education perspective, the respondents that regard Ukrainian immigrants as a threat fall into the following categories: 39% of people with primary education, 20% of people with secondary education, and 10% of people with higher education. In terms of residence, the defensive attitude towards the Ukrainian

immigrants is shared by 17% of Bucharest residents, 14% of residents of big cities, while the category of residents of small cities and that of rural residents display an equal percentage of 24% each (<https://www.romaniajournal.ro/society-people/inscop-survey-41-of-romanians-see-middle-eastern-migrants-as-threat/>).

Finally, the Romanians' attitude towards workers from South Asia is also polarized by the clash between acceptance on grounds of an economic necessity and hostile rejection supported by a nationalistic discourse. Consequently, although South Asian immigrants have been filling the labor shortage in construction, hospitality, and delivery for almost a decade now, being highly appreciated by employers for their discipline and diligence, they still face such challenges as:

- difficult social integration due to cultural and language barriers;
- discriminatory behavior from the locals, occasionally culminating with violent incidents, due to the exacerbation of the far-right xenophobic discourse in the past few years;
- stereotypical perceptions based on appearance and cultural differences;
- occasional exploitation by employers who break labor regulations or contract conditions (https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/whats-new/publications/romania-exploratory-study-labour-immigration_en).

These challenges have contributed to the shaping of the so-called *transit point mentality*, on grounds of which Romania is not considered for long-term stability, but merely as a stepping stone to wealthier Western European countries.

By corroborating the above, we can detect the following dimensions of the Romanians' attitude towards immigrants:

- In spite of the almost twenty-year-old EU membership, the Romanian society is still mentally unprepared to integrate immigrants, in the same way as the Western EU countries were not, and probably are still not prepared for the genuine acceptance and integration of the Romanian immigrants;
- The Romanian society is still polarized between tolerance and hostility in terms of perceiving and embracing diversity;
- The generational factor is statistically proven to be very important when it comes to the perception of otherness, since the most tolerant age groups appear to be the young (18-35 year olds), who have obviously not gone either through the trauma of the communist regime or through the one of forced migration after 1989;
- The social and cultural environment is also a determining factor in understanding and accepting diversity, as urban spaces provide more exposure to multiculturalism and, implicitly, develop such cosmopolitan skills as cross-cultural adaptability, empathy and relational intelligence. On the other hand, people in rural areas perceive globalization rather as a threat to their traditional life and, therefore, are more vulnerable to the far-right nationalist and xenophobic discourse, which impairs their capacity to deal with a culturally diverse environment;
- Education, as a source of cognitive and social development, is of critical importance in dismantling stereotypes and promoting an inclusive environment. By providing a multiple perspective on human society, education equips people with a higher comprehension capacity, reflected in the statistical figures that present educated people as more tolerant, empathic and open to diversity.

3. CONCLUSION. THE DOUBLE-SIDED MIRROR OF ROMANIAN HOSPITALITY

This study uses the concept of double-sided in an attempt to show that the Romanians' attitude towards immigrants is actually the reflection of our own experience as immigrants in the Western countries of the EU. Thus, the limited ability to deal with otherness and to manage cultural differences does not stem from genuine racism, but rather from a defense mechanism driven by the so-called diaspora experience with its traumatic discrimination and marginalization.

The reflexive approach opens up a revealing perspective on the interplay between being *the other* and dealing with *otherness*, as well as on the power dynamics therein.

Thus, being the other involves a pervasive sense of inferiority induced by the host society on account of superficial knowledge and stereotypes. In this sense, the image of the Romanian immigrant in the Western countries is the reflection of the myth of the uncivilized, unruly, corrupted Easterner, threatening to disrupt a well-established social order. The pressure of the hostile environment enhances the state of anxiety and, at the same time, the sense of alienation of uprooted individuals that feel rejected and marginalized by the new environment. Ultimately, marginalization and alienation have a destructive impact on the immigrants' self-perception, blurring their self-esteem and their sense of belonging. Therefore, the image of the Romanian immigrant shaped at the intersection between Western stereotypes (heterostereotypes) and self-stereotypes, as Daniel David states.

This double-mirrored identity, in turn, shapes our ambivalent attitude towards immigrants, which oscillates between acceptance on grounds of pragmatic reasons and cultural protectionism stemming from the diaspora experience. From the reflexive perspective, defensive nationalism emerges from the fact that we, as a nation, have gradually internalized the way in which the West perceives us as second-class citizens. Although the defensive attitude is not general and it displays various intensity degrees based on a series of factors previously discussed, its mere persistence over such a long period proves the influence of *the external gaze* on the self-perception of a nation, as well as the impact of the latter on the perception of otherness.

Studies dedicated to the migration phenomenon (Sandu 2010, Anghel 2013) have emphasized not only the Romanians' ambiguous attitude towards immigrants, but also the absence of an empathy transfer that should be only natural for a nation with such a large diaspora. In other words, the diaspora experience has not translated into migrant empathy, nor has it determined an enhanced understanding of the challenges of uprooting. Some researchers are of the opinion that this emotional opacity is determined by the conviction that their own migration is more justified than that of the people crossing our borders. The same incapacity for emotional transfer underlies the schizophrenic mentality by virtue of which the Romanians demand open borders in the Schengen area for themselves, but closed borders for foreigners trying to enter Romania.

Finally, it becomes clear that the occasional manifestation of hostility on the part of the Romanian society towards immigrants is a mere re-enactment of the Western

attitude towards Romanian immigrants. It should be pointed out, though, that this reflexive behavior ultimately turns against us and deepens our identity crisis, making us feel Western when we are at home and Eastern when we are abroad.

Under, the circumstances, the main solutions for the Romanians to break free from the vicious circle of reflexive marginalization are the following:

- To revisit historical experience in a responsible and reasonable manner, so that to learn lessons and to make healing sense of collective trauma;
- To acknowledge painful memories and reconcile with them in order to break the vicious circle of prejudice and hand down healthy patterns of thought and behavior to the next generations;
- To understand that the genuine inclusion does not have anything in common with colonial power relations but, on the contrary, with mutual respect for cultural differences and the willingness to meet on the common ground of universally human values;
- To accept that the embracing of diversity does not involve giving up national identity, but rather its continuous self-assertion in the double -sided mirror of the relationship with the other.

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