Romanian Cultural Identity After Admission to the European Union

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Abstract

This article aims to report on the cultural identity of Romanians after Romania's admission to the European Union as described by Romanians themselves, especially in light of the trending unofficial appropriation of the term "European" to be synonymous with European Union status. A semi-structured survey was conducted that included twenty-two adult Romanians, Romanian being defined by holding Romanian citizenship. The data was then coded according to social science methodology to categorize emerging themes and aid in analysis. The analysis revealed four prominent themes that give insight into specifically the political landscape of Romania through Romanian cultural identity after Romania's admission to the European Union. Issues of concern for participants were the metaphorical marginalization of Romania politically and economically within the European Union and problems of corruption, but contrasted with a strong overall commitment still to staying within the European Union and simultaneously maintaining good relations with their non-European Union neighbors.

Key words: *European Cultural Identity, Culture and Politics*

In recent years in both French and English, I have often heard the term "European" been used synonymously to refer to a citizen of a country inside the European Union. However, I find this description problematic, because European is a description for people inhabiting an entire continent, not simply those residing within the European Union. As a cultural anthropologist, the appropriation of the term European to be synonymous with residing inside the European Union, made me want to further examine what cultural identity means for citizens of countries living on the geographic edge of the E.U. Notably, those whose neighbors might not be E.U. members or whose E.U. neighbors are in many ways pulling away from the social and democratic commitments that are supposed to be prerequisite for membership to the E.U. (e.g. Poland and Hungary). This

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article will specifically examine these questions in regard to Romania. I surveyed twenty-two adult Romanians with the major question of what is Romanian cultural identity after Romania's admission to the European Union. Participants had various ages ranging from 20-64 and resided in various cities in Romania or lived outside of Romania and still had retained their Romanian citizenship status. Requirements for participating were being over 18 years of age and being a citizen of Romania, including with dual nationality, if applicable.

It should be noted that despite having survey participants who are diverse in terms of age and geography, most of the participants can be categorized as highly educated, meaning that younger participants were enrolled in bachelor's degree programs and all older participants held at least a bachelor's degree or higher. Furthermore, due to the fact that I do not speak Romanian, all of the participants spoke Romanian and English, and often a third or fourth language. For the purposes of obtaining information for my research, this was very helpful, but it does limit the demographic of participants I was able to reach. Thus, the findings I present may not account for the other viewpoints that could be widely held by other demographics of Romanians regarding Romanian cultural identity after admission to the European Union.

Based on the survey responses, four themes emerged regarding the cultural identity of Romanians after joining the E.U. Theme One is that Romania sits at a cultural, geographic and political crossroads between Western Europe and Eastern Europe and it is the gatekeeper between these two spheres. Theme Two is that Romanians feel connected to both the European Union and European countries outside of the E.U. Theme Three is Romania is on the economic and political periphery of the European Union. Theme Four is Romania belongs in the European Union but abysmal levels of corruption (as described by Romanians) prevent Romania logistically from having a more politically and economically central role in the European Union. Whether all of the participant responses are based on objectivity or rather sometimes self-replicated clichés that are internally harbored in Romanian culture is not possible to distinguish.

However, self-reported descriptions of Romanian cultural identity give others a window through which to understand the current social and political situation in Romania, a country that sits in a pivotally strategic location, but is often unknown to outsiders. This is because as Kellner

(2003: 2) writes: "Culture in the broadest sense is a form of highly participatory activity, in which people create their societies and identities. Culture shapes individuals, drawing out and cultivating their potentialities and capacities for speech, action, and creativity." This is to say that culture does not exist in a vacuum and Romanians are passively reporting on their cultural identities. Rather, Romanians through their own lived experiences that shape their cultural identities are helping (either consciously or unconsciously) to form the social (and inevitably at least partially political) landscape of Romania that exists through their active creation of culture.

In the 21st century, it is impossible to talk about the culture and politics of a country without speaking about borders. Passi (2011: 28) writes, "Any valid contextual theorization of boundaries should combine at least such processes, practices and discourses such as the production and reproduction – or institutionalization – of territoriality/territory, state power, human agency and human experience." This qualitative research highlights the element of the human experience as reflected by descriptions of cultural identity, which in this context, gives non-Romanians another lens through which to learn about Romania's contemporary society and politics as formed in part also by its borders. The concept of borders plays a key role in this study, because a requirement for participation was Romanian citizenship. That is to say that the cultural identity that is being examined through this research is not based on simply an ethnic link to Romania, but rather a legal one defined by borders. Moreover, the central question of this study is: what is Romanian cultural identity after Romania's admission to the European Union? Status within or outside of the European Union is once again defined by official borders. However, perhaps what is most interesting in relation to the survey responses and border studies is the unofficial border that many respondents designated Romania as between Eastern and Western Europe.

The first theme that emerged from the survey is that Romania sits at a cultural, geographic and political crossroads between Western Europe and Eastern Europe and it is the gatekeeper between these two spheres. When participants were asked to describe the geographic location of Romania from their own point of view, phrases such as "at the crossroads or borderline between East and West" were reoccurring responses. Another participant specifically described Romania's location as, "being at the gate between East and West." Participants felt as though they have always been

a part of both sides of Europe and one respondent stated that his identity as a Romanian has not changed after admission to the European Union, since being European is part of what defines being Romanian itself as well, because clearly Romania sits on the European continent. Other responses to describe Romania's geographic location grouped it in Central Europe, the Balkans or Southeastern Europe. Perhaps Romania's cultural identity of a Latin country surrounded by Slavic or Hungarian neighbors (with the exception of the Republic of Moldova) has put the country in a unique situation of not having a shared cultural identity with its surrounding neighbors. However, because of Romania's distance from other Latin countries and the very different historical path Romania took from countries that might be more culturally similar, such as Italy, Romania also does not find direct solidarity either with its Latin counterparts in Western Europe. This information, when placed within the framework of how the appropriation of the term "European" to mean only within the European Union has affected Romanians, appears to support the idea that Romanians have always viewed themselves as Europeans. Furthermore, Romanians belong to both Western and Eastern Europe, irrelevant of the changes in terminology regarding "European" identity associated sometimes now with only being inside of the E.U.

This segues into the second theme from the research that appeared, which is that Romanians feel connected to both the European Union and European countries outside of the E.U. Participants were asked about how Romania should interact with neighboring countries outside of the E.U. and if Romania should stay in the E.U. in two separate questions. In regards to the relationship Romania should have with non-E.U. neighbors, all of the responses were neutral or positive. Reponses included similar variations of phrases such as, "We should stay open and friendly." A few respondents included comments that Romania should support non-E.U. neighbors with bids to join the E.U. or should continue to work on bilateral projects, regardless of the other country's status outside of the E.U. When asked if Romania should stay in the E.U., 95% responded yes, that Romania should remain. These responses bolster the idea that Romania is an important link between E.U. and non-E.U. countries culturally and also politically. Ross (2009: 134) writes, "…culture is important to the study of politics, because it provides a framework for organizing people's daily worlds, locating the self and others in them, making sense of the actions

and interpreting the motives of others, for grounding an analysis of interests, for linking identities to political action, and for predisposing people and groups towards some actions and away from others."

In terms of cultural identity and politics, Romanians (based on the participant group) do not seem to be influenced by the types of hyper-nationalistic and extreme right rhetoric that have become pervasive in Hungary and Poland. Rather, Romania holds a special cultural place that could be much better utilized in the political realm to mediate more common development goals between E.U. and non-E.U. countries. The open-mindedness reflected in the cultural landscape of Romania should serve as a sign for other countries within the E.U. to assist Romania in achieving a more central political and economic role within the European Union. This role could especially include facilitating the successful entry of future new countries to the European Union, which were also former communist countries.

However, the third theme the research revealed is that Romania is for the moment on the economic and political periphery of the European Union. In terms of culture, Romanians see themselves as belonging to the European Union and wanting to have a relationship with more powerful E.U. counterparts in the West. But according to Romanians, E.U. members from the West look down upon Romanians. One participant said that the Western states see Romanians as the "poor cousins from the Balkans." Therefore, culturally, Romania is also pushed to the edge of the E.U. not by Romanians but by other E.U. members in the West. Although organically the majority of Romanians have kept a cultural identity that is friendly to both E.U. and non-E.U. countries, it works against the interests of not just Romania, but the European Union as a whole to continuously allow Romania to remain at the edge of the E.U. in all the possible senses. Romanians see themselves culturally as friendly with their more Western counterparts. But if these other states continue to not provide a central space for Romania politically and economically, they run the risk of eventually dissatisfied Romanians possibly identifying disproportionately with their Eastern side and becoming more amenable to illiberal rhetoric. The concept of "European" as only being part of the E.U. actually enhances illiberal rhetoric, as it becomes the unintentional foil to the language and cultural identity founded on illiberal politics. Krastev and Holmes (2018: 127) write, "The ultimate revenge of the Central and East European

populists against Western liberalism is not merely to reject the 'imitation imperative,' but to invert it. We are the real Europeans, Orbán and Kaczyński claim, and if the West wants to save itself, it will have to imitate the East."

Mainstream Romanian cultural identity, as interpreted from the survey group, is far from reflecting illiberal politics. However, the theme of Romania being at the edge of the E.U. was abundantly clear. The E.U. must be careful that Romanians do not one day feel as though they do not belong in the European Union anymore by always being shoved to the periphery. The E.U. should act to centralize Romania's political and economic position while the cultural landscape of Romania is still equally Eastern and Western and therefore open and amenable to equal political and economic participation with both E.U. and non-E.U. members in order to create a more prosperous and secure continent of Europe as a whole.

Moreover, the fourth theme that developed from the research is that Romania belongs in the European Union, as reported by participants, but that abysmal levels of corruption (as described by Romanians) prevent Romania logistically from having a more politically and economically central role in the European Union. The vast majority of participants commented in the survey about how concerned they were with corruption in the Romanian government. For comparative purposes, I interviewed a security studies expert from Bulgaria who said in reference to both Bulgaria and Romania, "Unless the E.U. finds a balancing act between support and efficient control, its authority will only diminish, and the two countries will remain marginal."

In summary, the E.U. must act to assist Romania in a stronger way to address its corruption issues and by doing so at the same time draw Romania more into the economic and political center of the E.U. The barriers to Romania not being more central in the E.U. at the moment are internal corruption in the government and a lack of interest from more powerful Western E.U. members to truly treat Romania as an equal member. The barrier, however, is not one based on the mainstream cultural identity of Romanians. Most Romanians want to be part of the European Union and for Romania to hold a more important place as a member state. The European Union should act immediately and swiftly to capitalize on this cultural openness to the European Union, while it is still present among the majority of Romanians. As evident from Hungary and Poland,

issues of cultural and national identity underpin the current rhetoric and momentum of illiberalism. The European Union would be smart to support Romania now with stronger and more tangible actions to combat corruption and to draw the country more into the metaphorical center of the E.U. Many Romanians are amenable to these actions as shown through survey responses, but if the E.U. waits too long, there may be a potential risk for mainstream Romanian cultural identity to change and thus the political landscape of Romania with it, which could create a new desire for illiberalism among the general population.

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