

THE GREAT UNION OF 1918 AS A SYMBOL OF MODERN ROMANIA'S POLITICAL IDENTITY

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Abstract: *Etymologically, but also hermeneutically, it is precisely the quality of the symbol to bring together things or beings from other regimes of existence (whether ontological, cultural, or political different regimes). Thus, we can say that by bringing together, in one political body, all Romanians in historical provinces separated by different governments (especially through the persons who exercise the leadership), but identical by language, belief and elements of culture, the Great Union from 1918 is a symbol of the political identity of Romania as a modern state. In other words, identity is built around symbols that have, among other qualities, the ability to express the durability of a thing.*

Keywords: *national identity, symbols of cultural and political identity, Romanian national state, The Great Union of 1918.*

The notion of identity is a polysemantic one and this first characteristic can be seen in its denotative role as a part of an expression: we talk about the “national identity,” “cultural identity,” “ethnic identity,” “historical identity,” “social identity,” “professional identity,” “subjective identity,” “personal/individual identity,” “collective identity” and the examples could continue, chosen from any area where identities are discovered or where they are constructed. All these formulas are elements of recognition judgements in identifying determinations of individuals’ or communities’ attributes, which not only threaten their ontological status, but also emphasize their uniqueness.

If, in the logical and ontological perspectives on identity concept, the philosophical tradition plays a major role, the notions of political, cultural or psychological identities belong to modern and postmodern culture,

In a logical-psychological sense, identity means an “ego” that evolves in relation to an “you” or “he/she/it,” which allows, thanks to analogy, that in the socio-anthropological sense we consider identity as an ontological element given to individuals and communities, first as a determination of belonging (the essentialist perspective) and then as freedom of self-construction, a differential and defining

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condition on the human and political level of an “object,” from the very beginning under the influence of cultural, historical, political, institutional influences (constructivist perspective).

The “identity” established for individuals and communities has become a complex and problematic philosophical object, both as a subject and as an object of knowledge, going from the Greek term “idios” and Latin “id” that expresses the idea of what belongs to a thing or a human being, up to the current cultural and political meanings.

But identity is defined not only in the sphere of consciousness and self perception, it is not only the phenomenological aspect of the logical principle of identity, it is also the image of the “other” that sees you differently than he is and than you see yourself, whether he as a subject met you or not as a reflected “object”¹.

On the political level, this fact of the “difference” that makes a couple with identity, sends to the idea of recognizing an identity assumed by the actors in the foreground on the political stage (in the topic of this article’s case, the recognition by the great powers in 1919-1920 of the Romanian national unitary state, made in 1918).

The national identity of Romania’s meaning with its political and cultural aspects is closely related to the Great Union of a century ago of all Romanians from different historical provinces, in a unitary national state with a monarchical constitutional regime. Nowadays, noting that “traditional international relations are assaulted by restructuring or pressure that constrains new interrogations on our identity reference frames, individual and collective affiliation to a destiny and our own condition that resembles us or distinguishes us from other identities collective or supranational socio-human aggregates,” according to Aristide Cioabă and taking into account the meanings derived from various interpretations given to the notion of political identity, this concept reveals “the existence of a political constituent and coordinating structure, in fact, the state,” and also “the self-consciousness of the state system government’s actors on specificity, continuity or reproduction conditions for the existence and fundamental goals (...) achieved in the name and interest of the national community they represent.”² According to the same researcher, “the political identity is in fact an indestructible side or dimension of national identity,” and “European political identity can be defined by this individual and collective assumption of the preservation of constitutional diversity and pluralism, equal treatment, without discrimination.” In this regard, “Romania’s post-revolutionary political identity can send separately and/or simultaneously, or to the system of government established after the rejection of communist totalitarian experience, or to the consequences of the recent practices of institutional superstructures makers and European economic and political integration – a building (...) increasingly artificial as claimed superstate ridiculous demands”³.

¹ Charles Taylor, *Il Disagio della modernità*, traduzione di Giovanni Ferrara degli Uberti, Roma-Bari, Editori Laterza, 2011, pp. 56-57.

² “Despre identitatea politică individuală și colectivă cu Aristide Cioabă,” in vol. *Identitatea individuală în contextul globalizării. Studii și interviuri*, Coord. Lorena Stuparu, Aius, Craiova, 2013, p. 213.

³ *Ibidem*.

To contextualize concrete ways in which political identity of the Romanian state was structured by national and international historical events during a geopolitical game that changed the rules in an interval of about fifty years – at least the last two centuries, still trying to define national Romanian identity, if we refer to its body – this has undergone significant changes in history, beginning with the first documentary attestation of Romanian medieval state formations until the achievement of the national-state in 1918, continuing with the dismemberment that occurred as a result of the Wien Diktat. In other words, from this point of view, we must abandon essentialist perspectives on identity. However, we cannot waive the relevant steps concerning Romanian identity memory, regarding the specificity and continuity of the inhabitants of this area, and this leads us to Romanian spirituality, unspoiled throughout history. As shown by Ricoeur in the book *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, the collective memory that contributes to the definition of a narrative identity, is also about a political “creation.” The memory that can be considered beyond its temporal function as an expression of the way through which history with its crucial events is revealed to the present time, has a creative dimension within political identity. If state forms can be substituted by various forms and political regimes (in the case of Romania, after the Romanian national state achievement in December 1918, in December 1947 the Romanian state was proclaimed a Popular Republic, and in 1989 the totalitarian socialist state was replaced by a democratic state of law), “the nation is inevitable” (Emil Cioran).

In the frame of a modern nation, as George Schöpflin shows, identity takes shape by synthesizing all kinds of “collective human activity.” But in the area of politics, four are the significant processes of identity formation: the “increasing in complexity and intensity” of the modern state, the “network of associations” and the activities of civil society, “ethnicity” and “importance given to the international dimension”⁴.

As history shows, the creators of Great Romania in 1918 have taken all these aspects into account. But, moreover, “The creation of Great Romania, suddenly, in December 1918, represents the fulfilment of a secular dream of the Romanians to be together from Banat to the Nistru. This Great Romania is a country that is born with huge difficulties – people who have never been under the same political leadership have to unite and manage together. What unites all the Romanians is to speak the same language.”⁵

Etymologically, but also hermeneutically, it is precisely the quality of the symbol to bring together things or beings from other regimes of existence (whether ontological, cultural, or political different regimes). Thus, we can say that by bringing together, in one political body, all Romanians in historical provinces separated by different governments (especially through the persons who exercise the leadership), but identical by the language, belief and elements of folk culture, the Great Union from 1918 is a symbol of the political identity of Romania as a modern state. In other words, identity is built around symbols that have, among other qualities, the ability to express the durability of a thing.

⁴ George Schöpflin, *Nations, Identity, Power*, New York, New York University Press, 2000, pp. 29-30.

⁵ Neagu Djuvara, *O scurtă istorie a românilor povestită celor tineri*, 11th edition, revised and added, Humanitas, Bucharest, 2010, p. 236.

In this regard, Neagu Djuvara notes, "(...) this union that we made in 1918 was exceptionally successful. Seeing the difficulties that Czechs and Slovaks had to keep one country or the drama in former Yugoslavia (not only now, but throughout the interwar period), we must recognize that this union of the Romanians was miraculously realized. One example: Ionel Brătianu had a huge prestige and enjoyed the full confidence of King Ferdinand (the thirteen years when they were together in power were one of the great moments of accomplishment of our history). Ionel Brătianu, understanding that a Transylvanian was needed to cherish the union and to represent us in Paris when we were in difficulty because of peace in Bucharest, accepted a Transylvanian Prime Minister, i. e. Vaida-Voevod. A Transylvanian, not a man from Bucharest went to negotiate the Treaty of Trianon. Therefore, we have been extremely liberal in this sense, and we have been able to unite very precisely the four or five provinces that had previously been separated."⁶

Such politicians, for whom national interest was more important than personal pride, were trained in the spirit of the ideals of the state-nation, specific to the modern age. Pierre Manent considered that "The nation-state was for modern Europe what represented the city for ancient Greece: producing *res publica*, it was the source of the unit and, consequently, it gave meaning and life. (...) only the city and state-nation were able to achieve, at least in their democratic phase, the intimate union of civilization and freedom (...) It was about a very bold undertaking (...) about expanding civic life, a 'life in freedom', which was, at best, a minority privilege, up to the community made up of countless people. It was about the governance of large assemblies of people who remain free."⁷

Pierre Manent, in his turn, highlights the importance of the language spoken by people in the constitution of national states: "We, the Europeans, should be particularly aware of the political nature of the words. European languages are, as one says, 'national languages'. The statement is true if we understand by 'nation' a political body of a particular species. Indeed, our languages do not primarily send to an ineffective origin or to a series of incomprehensible experiences, but above all to an understandable political history to a great extent, to which we have access precisely because of the familiarity with the language in which this is expressed."⁸

Beside the language, other common elements that preserve the sense of national identity are faith and artistic creativity. Referring to the case of Romania, Dumitru Stăniloae points out that: "Christianity has been a significant factor of unity in our people's life. Separated from the hardships of past times through political borders and scattered among other nations, we have always remained a unitary people not only through language but also through religious life, which also contributed to keeping the same speech among all the Romanians. This role could fulfil Christianity in the lives of our people only because it was the same to all the Romanians, because it was felt itself as a unity among the Romanian

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 236-237.

⁷ Pierre Manent, *Rățiunea națiunilor. Reflecții asupra democrației în Europa*, Translated from French by Cristian Preda, Nemira, Bucharest, 2007, pp. 50-51.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 49.

people (...). Nicolae Iorga's visionary intuition surprised both the picturesque national character, as well as the human-social, or popular, side of the Romanian Church in Transylvania, when he called it the Church of the Villages and Priests (...) Through the Church, all the things of the people were transfigured, they were holy. All things gained prestige, glamor, which makes him proud of them, to take revenge for the humiliations they endure from worldly dominion (...). The church guided the life of the people with a supernatural beauty, because it was full of the products of the Romanian folk creation. The art of the people, had become the sacred art of the Church, to return to the people with the blessing of this sacredness. The wooden churches with doors carved with Romanian motifs and echoing the troparles modulations of our songs called 'doina', in which the people confessed to God not a sense of abstract spirituality but the concrete pains of their everyday life, were so close to the peasant houses, which also became – with the modest things in them, with the stories of God walking on the earth-, so resembling churches.”⁹

Thus is emphasized the importance of the religious culture for defining the identity of a people, an issue that also concerns Mircea Eliade: “In the frames of the same ethnic mass, what produces culture is not ethnical fibre itself. But a bunch of spiritual germs, most often developed by religion. Civilization is transmitted to an infinite number of generations and can cross the borders.” Moreover, “Culture is not caused by harsh historical events. History is itself a dynamic part of culture. Because history is not always produced by the stomach – but by beliefs, by doctrines, by spiritual deeds. And even when hunger creates a historical fact – that hunger, being produced by certain spiritual positions of the surrounding world, becomes a spiritual fact”¹⁰.

Besides language and faith publicly expressed in religion, the creative spirit is essential in the formation of a nation and a national state. For example, Mircea Eliade relies on cultural creation at the political level in history. In the interwar period, after the realization of the Romanian unitary national state as the ideal of an earlier generation, Mircea Eliade considered that Romania's only chance of affirming (which can not have political claims, as Emil Cioran considers in his book *Transfiguration of Romania*) is a cultural one. And this chance came to the young generation from that time which, unlike the “generation of union,” had no political ideal as the task and the historical/heroic obligation to be accomplished: “As I was seeing things, differences between the 'young generation' and those that preceded it were due primarily to the fact that our ancestors had achieved their historical mission: unifying the nation. (...) The crisis in which the Western world entered revealed that (...) we, the young generation, had to find ourselves. But, unlike our forefathers who were born and trained with the ideal of the wholeness of our nation (...) we were the first Romanian generation unconditionally in

⁹ Dumitru Stăniloae, “Liturgia și unitatea religioasă a poporului român,” in *Națiune și creștinism*, Elion Publishing House, Bucharest, 2004, pp. 187-189.

¹⁰ Mircea Eliade, “Cultura” in *Profetism românesc 1*, “Roza Vinturilor” Publishing House, Bucharest, 1990, p. 40.

advance of a historical objective to be achieved.”¹¹ In this context in which the political objective of the wholeness of the country had been reached, the philosopher understands by culture “any spiritual creation” and “the nation being a cultural instrument, the role of the state can only be to help each citizen to create.” But this will “actually create the spiritual fruitfulness of every citizen between the borders of a country,” ie, “human harmonizing with the world and his soul,” a “natural and fertile balance”¹². The consequence of a political act with symbolic value for its identity such as the Great Union of the Romanians in 1918 is an organic state which, according to Eliade, “enables each man to be a living organism within another great living organism,” which means “the creation, the enrichment of the Being.”¹³

It is clear that the Romanian national unitary state achieved in 1918 allowed the Romanians to create, even when it remained a nostalgic ideal for those in exile after 1947. Because the Romanian spiritual unity is sealed by the political union of 1918: “Whenever it comes to Romanian language, history or culture, people spontaneously respond to any kind of calling. The thirst of each of us to remind or learn the values created by the Romanian spirit, to compare them with such European or universal spiritual values, once again demonstrates the health and the integrity of the refugees’ mass. (...) In fact, this Romanian spiritual unity is, in a certain way, a manifestation of the profound political unity of our nation. For, just as the Romanians, whatever their personal beliefs, are always on January 24th, May 10th, on the King’s Day and at the commemoration of Transylvania’s reintegration – so they are ready to gather as far as is concerned of our nation’s soul, i.e., of our Romanian language, history and culture.”¹⁴

In other words, identity representations are closely related to national consciousness or national sentiment, and they “are formed (or distorted) by the organization of society within the nation-state.” According to René Girault, the “constituents” of national consciousness are the following: “a spoken language (even if there may be exceptions), an education based on a national history, a national political and cultural framework, a national economic and social system” to which may be added “a religious practice (...) a civilization of free time, a taste or art of living.”¹⁵

Beyond all this and beyond the civic-political and economic-social values underlying a state and defining its political identity, this is also expressed by the symbols around which collective narratives are built or in which an important historical sequence is concentrated.

In this respect, and because identity representations are indispensable to the understanding of history, Ioan Stanomir argues that the Constitution of 1923 is

¹¹ Mircea Eliade, *Memorii (1907-1960)*, second edition, revised and added, with index by Mircea Handoca, Humanitas, Bucharest, 1997, pp. 136-137.

¹² Mircea Eliade, “Cultura sau politica?,” in *Profetism românesc*, II, “Roza vânturilor” Publishing House, Bucharest, 1990, p. 46.

¹³ Mircea Eliade, “Impotriva deznădejdiei,” in vol. *Impotriva deznădejdiei*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 1992, p. 66.

¹⁴ Mircea Eliade, “Unitate spirituală,” in vol. *Impotriva deznădejdiei*, ed.cit., p. 67.

¹⁵ René Girault (coord.), *Identitate și conștiință europeană în secolul al XX-lea*, translated by Dan Burcea, Curtea Veche, Bucharest, 2004, pp. 18-19.

a symbol of the Great Union made in 1918, which we consider to be a symbol of Romania's political identity as a national state: "Great Romania is associated in public consciousness, but also in the history of constitutional forms, with the constitution of 1923. And, unquestionably, the review debated and voted in a parliament formed after the elections organized at the level of the whole kingdom, it has the merit of adapting the law to the exigencies of a state that has radically changed its demographic profile, political culture and international position."¹⁶ In an interview published in the *Romania literară* journal (10-11/2018), the same author emphasizes that:

"The Constitution of 1923, the Constitution of the Unification (...) is a remarkable Constitution," given that "the Union of 1918 is a succession of unions, consumed by legal acts of constitutional value. The Union of Bessarabia, the Union of Bukovina and, finally, the Union of 1 December 1918, with Transylvania. Each of these acts is the result of a freely expressed will of the Romanians in these provinces. They have as a corollary the transformation of Romania's structure from the Old Kingdom into Great Romania. This is, quite simply, the history, in major stanzas, for the year 1918 – a year of shaping the national unity from March to December." The importance of the Constitution of 1923 can be sought not only in establishing the rule of law and the idea of constitutional equality and good governance, but also in the fact that "Its strong point is symbolism – this is the Constitution of Great Romania." It represents "a model and a highlight of a Romanian legal traditions of the Old Kingdom."

If common language and faith are cultural symbols of the Romanians' identity in all historical provinces, the Union of 1918 and the Constitution of 1923 are its political symbols.

If the definition of collective identity is indissolubly linked to the political culture of individuals and communities, at the same time, the chance of a culture's existence is to be the expression of a well-established and acknowledged identity, all the more in a time of transformations and transitions that provide all the data of a paradigm shift.

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