

Stories of Love and Hate. Images of 'Homeland' in the Identity Narratives of Romanians in Ireland

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Abstract: Identity is a term that has sparked criticisms in the academic debates, with some scholars fully embracing this rather insufficiently defined concept, whereas others militate for its complete removal from the vocabulary of social sciences. However, in spite of the fierce criticism, identity research has become a central part of the social sciences. Striving to address some of the existing challenges in identity scholarship, the research presented in this article focuses on the diaspora identity narratives of Romanians in Ireland. By adopting a constructivist perspective on identity, this is a study of the continuously flowing boundaries between 'us' and 'them', as well as of the boundaries where the symbolic space is negotiated and identities are fiercely debated, constructed and re-constructed. While Romanians use a multitude of 'other' groups against which they construct their diaspora identities, one of the key markers used in their identity narratives is their relation with the ancestral homeland. Interesting findings have emerged, as Romanians talked about their mixed feelings towards their homeland and their fellow countrymen. As these narratives of the homeland unfold, it becomes clear they bear a strong imprint on their diaspora identity and feelings of belonging. The study presents an analysis of data collected over a six-year period (2004-2010) in the archives of the online discussion forum of the Romanian community from Ireland.

Keywords: *diaspora, identity, boundaries, online, homeland, Ireland, migration*

Introduction

Since the publication of the works of Erik Erikson and Gordon Allport in the late 1950s and early 1960s, identity has emerged as a key topic in the social sciences. Many scholars consider

Allport's book *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954) to have played a considerable role in linking identity to ethnicity. This strand of research has since then flourished and, particularly in the field of migration studies, research on identity and belonging has thrived over

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the last two decades. Mandaville (2001) attributes a key role in the expansion of this particular strand of research to the intense search and negotiation of identity in which diasporas engage due to their physical separation from the 'natural' setting of the homeland.

Just like all main concepts in the social sciences, 'identity' has got its fair share of fierce debate around its meaning and also around its alleged utility for the social sciences. Stuart Hall, one of the main contributors to the scholarship on identity, signals the major shifts in the definitions of this disputed concept throughout its history, from the 'old' essentialising perspective on identity (identity as a 'given', a static reality) to a post-modern approach to identity (identity as a process which undergoes continuous construction and re-construction) (Hall, 1994).

According to Hall (1994), post-modern identity needs to be understood as an open-ended project, which is negotiated and re-negotiated in different situations and contexts. Identity is thus not only about 'being', but also about 'becoming' (Triandafyllidou and Wodak, 2003). Moreover, the post-modern individual is no longer believed to have a single, homogenous identity (Giddens, 1991; Husband, 2005), but rather a fragmented one which the individual assembles (just like a mosaic) from a wide array of possible identifications.

Although the post-modern identity approach may appear to solve some of the key problematic issues in understanding identity, it has also generated a significant amount of debate and criticism. Arguments have been raised both in relation to the conceptualisation of identity, but also

in relation to its empirical applications.

One of the main critiques addressed to the constructionist approach is that it is believed to have destroyed the rationale for talking about identities (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). The two authors argue that identities in the post-modern acceptance are too ambiguous and 'infinitely elastic' (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000) and the concept became an increasingly popular term precisely because it 'could be adjusted to fit the various meanings granted to it' (Georgiou, 2006: 39).

Even more voices signalled the difficulty in using the concept of identity in empirical research. On one hand this is a direct consequence of the ambiguity surrounding the concept. Social researchers are bound to answer a pressing question in relation to how is identity to be measured empirically: what aspects of identity need to be included in the measurement to ensure relevance, while also avoiding an all-inclusive but meaningless viewpoint? On the other hand, there are concerns about the reliability of the concept of identity as a variable in empirical research: if identity has become fragmented and dynamic, then would it still be a useful concept and a reliable variable to be used in social research?

As many questions still remain to be answered, it becomes evident that while 'identity' is still very much an important concept in social sciences, it is not without its own intricacies. There is yet no single, clear definition of identity and the concept tends to acquire new meanings in different instances of its use. In spite of the multiple difficulties in coming to an agreement about the meanings of the concept, I argue that eliminating

the term 'identity' (together with other contested concepts) from the vocabulary of social sciences would render these sciences quite theoretically poor. Therefore what remains to be seen is not 'if', but rather 'how' can social research engage this key term in a creative way.

Frederik Barth's (1969) argues that one way of addressing the multiple difficulties in defining identity is to focus the analysis on the boundaries of an ethnic group, rather than on the cultural content delimited by them. Thus the boundary becomes a powerful identifier in discourses of identity. Bauman (1990) develops further the Barthian idea of boundaries and underlines the role of 'the Other' in the construction of who we are. Bauman (1990: 40) defines the 'we' (or the ingroup) as the space to which we belong and where we feel secure. On the opposite, 'they' represents the group to which someone cannot or does not wish to belong.

The key advantage of this approach is that it enables us to eliminate some of the ambiguity surrounding the concept of 'identity' and clarify its meanings, thus addressing one of the key gaps in identity studies. By focusing on the symbolic borders between groups, we can see how individuals and groups negotiate their identities in the social context and in relation to 'Others'.

This relational view on identity also enables social researchers to actively engage the concept in empirical research. By investigating its contours, researchers are confident that they can indirectly discover the 'content' of a group's identity. The great merit of this approach is that it eliminates the perpetual obstacles in operationalising

the concept of identity in empirical research.

The study presented in this article constitutes a part of my doctoral research programme that focuses on mapping the identity narratives of the Romanian diaspora living in Ireland. The methodology proposed by this study stems from a constructivist perspective, and it looks at identity as a process that is negotiated in the everyday life and interactions of diasporic people. Following on from the line of research opened by Barth and Baumann, this research places a strong emphasis on the processes of boundary creation and negotiation in the identity discourses as it examines the reflections of the Romanian diaspora in Ireland around their identity and the identities of 'relevant Others'.

When choosing to study identity from a relational perspective, the markers (or identifiers) in relation to whom identity is being constructed become of key importance (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). Thus, the choices people make from a wide range of possible identifiers become particularly relevant. For example, findings emerging from this research point to the fact that Romanianness is defined in relation to a multitude of 'Other' diasporic groups (e.g. being Romanian vs. being Polish or Lithuanians in Ireland etc.), 'Other' religious groups (e.g. being Orthodox – as are most Romanians - vs. being Catholic – as are many more of the other European countries), 'Other' political entities (being a member of the EU or not), but also in relation to being Gypsy, being Moldovan (from the Moldovan republic). Important distinctions have

also been made in relation to being a Romanian in Ireland vs. a Romanian migrant elsewhere, between living in Romania and living abroad.

While there are many identifiers from which people can choose in their identity discourses, many scholars have pointed to 'the State' as one of the most powerful identifiers particularly in the study of ethnic, migrant or diasporic groups and their identity narratives. Smith (1991: 143) argues that the nation is important because it permeates most spheres of activity in the life of individuals and communities. Moreover, the author asserts that the nation provides the most inclusive community and it may also be seen as the basic unit of moral economy, in terms both of territory and of resources and skills (144). Georgiou (2006: 85) also views that 'home' is important because it is 'a synonym to familiarity, intimacy, security and identity against the unknown, the distant and the large'.

Parekh dedicated an entire chapter in his book *A New Politics of Identity* (2008: 56) to the topic of national identities. The author points out that members of a political community (such as the nation state) grow up in a particular national culture and will eventually be shaped by its values and ethos. Thus, belonging to the national community is a valued part of each individual's identity and will therefore not be entirely abandoned in exchange for other forms of belonging.

Consequently 'homeland' represents a common point of identification (as the country of origin) and it constitutes as well a common pool of cultural values, memories, myths and symbols that will have an impact in shaping migrants' feeling of belonging.

Thus, the images of homeland are particularly important when we discuss the case of diasporic identity discourses. Their physical separation from the country of origin leads to specific forms of attachment and belonging. Migrant or diasporic identities are deeply anchored in transnational spaces, linking the old and the new identities, the homeland and the host country(ies).

This article sets out to evaluate the different discourses that Romanian migrants in Ireland construct when they refer to their ancestral home. It begins with a brief overview of the country and its people which aims to map the main ideas and expressions used by Romanians in Ireland when describing their homeland. Many interesting findings emerge in relation to the rather mixed picture diasporic Romanians build about their country of origin and their co-citizens. The article endeavours to interpret these images and discourses of the homeland through the lens of diasporic identity construction.

Methodology

There is a dearth of studies in relation to the diasporic narratives of identity of Romanian communities abroad. Thus, this research is rather exploratory in nature and it aims at understanding the identity narratives of the Romanian migrants in Ireland and to comprehend the process through which these identities are constructed. In order to achieve these aims, the study uses a predominantly qualitative methodology.

Moreover, the nature of the topic

studied, also recommends a qualitative methodological approach as identity and belonging are dynamic processes that can hardly be quantified and measured through a quantitative approach without the risk of oversimplifying the two concepts.

This study is based on an ethnographic investigation of the online discussion forum of the Romanian community in Ireland. The main advantage offered by ethnographic research is that it allowed for a long-term and in-depth immersion into the life of the community and this enabled the capture of the identity discourse(s) of a community as a collective and continuous process of negotiation and re-negotiation. Participant observation and content analysis have been used to examine the messages posted on forum and their meaning in relation to the topic studied.

The forum constitutes a rich source of information about Romanians as a community, the ways in which they see themselves and others. Findings indicate that the forum constitutes the centrepiece of Romanian community life in Ireland. Moreover, the forum allows access to information over a long time-span (2004-2010)¹, thus including many key moments in the life of the community. Another important aspect is that on the forum, identity unfolds naturally, like in everyday life, through stories and experiences, without answers being prompted by specific questions.

Discussion forums have rarely been used in social research and even fewer studies have taken advantage of the archived content that discussion forums contain. It is precisely by focusing on the archived content of the

forum that I envisage to explore the dynamic identity narratives in different contexts.

Alternative geographies? Where are we exactly on the map?

While it was expected that different voices in the diasporic community would produce different narratives of home by highlighting various aspects and images of the homeland, findings surprisingly indicate that even the geographical location of the homeland may be subject to debate among the diaspora.

Not until long ago, societies and communities were understood exclusively in terms of their geographical boundaries as this facilitated people's identification with and belonging to them: 'physical proximity, defined by locality and residence, was central in the conventional understanding of community' (Kennedy and Roudometof, 2001:11). Existing scholarship indicates that in the last decade there has been a marked change towards a more symbolic understanding of geography. Thus, according to Kennedy and Roudometof (2001), nation states (and communities in general) need to be constructed symbolically. While this perspective dates back as early as 1967, when Walzer (1967) referred to the state as an invisible entity that 'must be personified before it can be seen, symbolized before it can be loved, imagined before it can be conceived' (Walzer, 1967 in Ruggie, 1992: 157), the clear breakthrough came in 1983, when Benedict Anderson proposed the

term ‘imagined communities’ to define ‘all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact’ (Anderson, 1991[1983]: 6). This new approach on communities does not imply that ‘locality’ has vanished or that it has become irrelevant. Instead, ‘locality’ has just acquired a symbolic dimension.

In the same line, findings point to an intriguing dilemma which emerged on the forum in relation to the position occupied by Romania in Europe. Analysing the online debates of Romanians in Ireland it became evident that even a science of physical borders (as geography is) can be subjective and allow for many alternative visions. In 2009, a forum discussion thread dealt with the complex issue of Romania’s geographical, cultural and strategic position in Europe.

There were voices that placed Romania (geographically, as well as culturally and historically) together with the other Central European countries in a European continent that extends its borders to the Ural Mountains.

Other forum members however argued that Romania is clearly placed in the East of Europe and highlight the fact that many Western Europeans are not even aware or do not acknowledge the Ural Mountains as the eastern border of the continent. Further more, they feel that in this scenario Romania has probably not even been considered to be part of Europe until the last two waves of EU accession created a more inclusive definition of Europe.

When actual distances are considered, arguments also seem to indicate that Romania is placed rather in the East of Europe rather than in the

centre. As one of the forum participants pointed out, there are nearly 650 km between Bucharest and Istanbul and more than 2200 km between Bucharest and Amsterdam. This perspective argues that Romania is undoubtedly placed in the South-East of Europe.

These different visions of Romania articulate an interesting debate about the distinction between the actual geographical borders and the cultural geographic claims. Forum members pointed out to the fact that other countries (such as Ukraine) are also making similar assertions about belonging to the Central European space. However as the forum discussants argue, these claims can only become legitimate if and when they are acknowledged and recognised by others:

[...] I don’t know how relevant is for us to debate about Romania’s geographical positioning on the European map as long as we treated [negatively] the way we are... (2009 – M01)

This last paragraph summarises one of the key aspect of Romanians identity: our image in the eyes of ‘the Others’ tends to put a significant constraint on who we are and who we claim we are. The subtle meanings deeply embedded in this sentence will unfold throughout the article as the narratives of Romania and being Romanian take shape.

Romania: the land of all the problems

Having highlighted some of the alternative visions of Romania’s geographical, political and cultural

position in Europe, the focus will shift next to stress out the views and opinions exposed by Romanians in Ireland when they discuss about their homeland and its citizens.

There are not many positive things that Romanians have to say about 'living in Romania'. For many, it is a country that offers no opportunities for young people to earn a decent living or to promote their career. They feel that salaries are at an incredibly low level which hardly reflects their educational achievements, their skills or competences. For some of the speakers, the experiences are dramatic:

[...] I'm dying here in this country... I have got to a point where I am working for free in Romania just so that I can practice my own profession and to acquire some work experience and seniority [...] I feel that life is passing me by and I have no chance in this shit-hole of a country. (2006 – M10)

Starting a business in Romania is also perceived by forum users to be a nearly impossible task. The lack of economic stability makes it hard to plan your business in the long term. In addition to this, bureaucracy, corruption and bribes add to the burden of a business start-up.

Corruption does not only affect entrepreneurs but just about everybody in the society. Many forum members seem to view that corruption is 'the New Religion' in the Romanian society, becoming more like 'a way of doing things Romanian-style' (2007 – M02). Starting with the political leaders and company managers to the regular people in their everyday lives, everybody give and take bribes in exchange for favours.

The legal system is perceived

to be totally inefficient in fighting corruption. Many think that laws are either conceived to suit the interests and purposes of the powerful or they are simply not applied. This constitutes the main reason why people have completely lost their trust in the police force and the justice system. When the failures of the justice system become noticed abroad, they cause Romanians in Ireland a huge embarrassment and also result in damaging effects to their identities by reinforcing the stigma associated with 'being Romanian'.

[...] Sometimes I don't feel like saying out loud that I am Romanian. It depends on the circumstances... sometimes I am from Transylvania or... Christmas Island! (2006 – M05)

For many forum members, living in Romania takes nerves of steel in order to survive and they recall the lack of money, bureaucracy, corruption, and the difficult interactions with rude public officers as the some of main causes of stress. Romania's road infrastructure, the health system and the educational system are also harshly criticised by Romanians abroad.

Romania's problems were brought even more to the forefront in the year preceding the country's joining the European Union. During this period the critical reports of Romania's slow progress were extensively scrutinised by Romanians in Ireland on their online communication platform. To a great extent their opinions seemed to echo the conclusions formulated in these Country Progress Reports. Forum contributors felt that Romania was not yet ready to join the EU, before 'cleaning the communists from our backyard' (2006 – M05) and 'speeding up the pace' (2006 – F05).

On the other hand there are also voices on the forum which tried to counter these feelings of inferiority that Romanians have in relation to the European Union by suggesting that we are not worse than other EU members when they had to prepare their accession process:

We shouldn't always be so humble in front of them, we are not slaves! We have to fit many criteria in order to join the EU, and other countries namely Ireland had no problems joining when in fact it had similar problems in the main areas where we have 'red flags' as well! [e.g. securing the borders; high level corruption] [...] I'm not saying that the level of corruption is not problematic in Romania, but they should take a look in their back garden before they speak about us. (2006- M01)

The feelings of shame for the country's apparent lack of progress have not ceased after 2007 when Romania joined the European Union. Quite on the contrary, the sense of inferiority seems to be working its way deeper into the Romanian identity narratives. For example when many countries (including Ireland and the UK) decided to impose work restrictions for Romanian and Bulgarian workers, people felt that we are a nation of *indésirables* and that, ironically, even 'Zimbabwe will soon impose work restrictions on Romanians' (2008 – M06).

Findings indicate that although many all these problems summarise the main issues which characterise the present-day Romania, many of them also constitute the key factors that determined the migrants to leave their homeland and settle elsewhere. These factors however do not cease

to affect the migrants after they settle in a different location. As the map of Romania's problems starts to catch contour in the forum narratives, it also becomes more apparent that these aspects carry potentially negative impacts on Romanian migrants' attachment to their homeland. There are multiple ways in which the situation in Romania imprints on the lives of migrants.

On the one hand migrants keep in touch with their family and friends at home and they tend to see the country not only through diasporic eyes, but also through the eyes of their dear ones. Thus, the homeland's sad realities appear as extremely real and immediate even for those living thousands of kilometres away from 'the source'. According to the opinions expressed on the forum these images also impact greatly on the evaluation and re-evaluation of their decision to return.

On the other hand forum members also mention undergoing negative feelings and experiences when returning 'home' for holidays. For some it is the immediate reaction they get when they encounter unfriendly Romanian customs officers at the airport: the fact that they are not smiling and they treat one like dirt is, for many forum members, a sign that one is no longer in the 'civilised European space' and is now crossing the border and re-entering the 'land of problems'.

Upon return, the country is also experienced as an expensive and stressful experience:

I am going home and I stay with my folks or friends and still I end up spending more than if I went

on an exotic holiday. I come back [to Ireland] tired and angry. [After that] I need another holiday. Therefore I go back quite rarely and I would rather take a holiday in a country where relaxation is guaranteed. (2008 – M02)

Findings clearly seem to indicate that Romanians in Ireland do not have a positive image of their homeland's progress and situation. Some opinions describe the situation as extremely sad, calling their ancestral home '*the Valley of Sorrows*'². It comes thus to no surprise that several Romanian migrants mentioned on the forum that their decisions to leave the homeland stems from a feeling that Romania is simply the 'wrong country' for them and consequently anywhere is better than in Romania.

In spite of some of these negative portrayals of the homeland, some forum members argue that an important distinction needs to be made between Romania as a country that needs to be loved and the people that live in it.

This resonates with one of the most popular sayings in Romania: 'Romania is a beautiful country, too bad it is inhabited'. This reflection indicates that Romania represents at the basic level a geographical space that cannot carry any blame for its own situation or lack of development. It is the responsibility of people to make Romania a better place which will eventually inspire more pride to its citizens.

While some positive aspects have been mentioned about 'being Romanian', there seems to be a great variety of shades in which the picture of the 'typical Romanian' is painted by the forum members. On the one hand Romanians are praised for being good workers. There seems to be a

significant difference from this point of view between Romanians 'at home' and those who have migrated. As one forum user mentions, Romanians only show a healthy work ethic when working abroad and this is mainly because of an existing vicious cycle between the level of pay and the work ethos.

Another positive element mentioned is that Romanians find it easy to get adapted in each situation. However while sometimes this is achieved through will-power and determination, in other situations the methods they adopt are said to be less Orthodox:

It seems that the true Romanian is the one who has learnt to push and shove... to manage situations... He is the one who has the guts to cut in front of the queue. To disobey the law without a trace of guilt if his personal interests require so... (2006 – M09)

This last quote points to other aspects which forum users see as characteristic for Romanians: selfishness and individualism. Thus instead of bonding with other co-citizens and contribute to the collective community construction (either online or offline), forum members feel that Romanians generally lack the civic spirit and the social unity that a community needs. In their opinion this will further negatively impact on the shaping a collective identity for Romanians in Ireland

The reason why Romanians don't like to meet and socialise with other Romanians represents for the forum members a big dilemma and they are suggesting multiple explanations for what they call 'the mentality of standing divided'. Disenchantment

with the situation at home as well as the stigma and shame associated to being labelled as ‘Romanian’ are for the forum members the key reasons why Romanians in Ireland might not feel the incentive to participate more in the collective events (national day celebrations, protests etc.):

[...] Romanians are not interested in the National Day celebrations or in any other forms of association that might remind them that they are Romanians [...] [They must say to themselves] So what if my son will never know who Stefan the Great [Prince of Moldavia] was? And so what if my son will think that his father was born somewhere west of Asia. [...] For these people the only thing that counts is that they left that shitty country behind and that they can now hide their Romanianness in the box. These people say they are Romanians only when we get Gold medals in sports competitions, otherwise he calls his own people... ‘these fucking Romanians’. (2007 – M04).

For some of the online discussants, the lack unity in the community has also deep roots in the generalised lack of trust between Romanians during the Communist regime when Romanians were said to betray even their close friends and family to the Securitate for meagre benefits or to escape from accusations themselves. After the Communist regime ended in 1989, it was also common belief that many Romanians residing abroad illegally would collaborate with the local Police and betray their friends and acquaintances (who were also residing illegally) in exchange for legal status. Although there is not enough proof to support these hear-say accusations, it becomes apparent that many

Romanians in Ireland do not trust their co-ethnics.

In certain circumstances, this lack of trust may lead to the desire to distance themselves from their fellow citizens:

You see a Romanian woman in the street with her child and as soon as she hears that you speak Romanian she will quickly [switch to English and] call her child: “Kevin, come to mother!” and then she simply pretends she can’t see you. But what she forgets is that she is wearing a leather jacket and has a hair-do that screams ‘Eastern European’ [...] and she also carries a plastic bag in her hand. This all means that the person does not feel very good about herself and she tries to pass as someone that she will never be. (2007 – M08)

Such extreme efforts to distance themselves from other Romanians may also be interpreted from a different angle: the desire by some Romanian migrants to Ireland to assimilate into the host society. Well established strategies, such as children naming practices, speaking exclusively the host society language at home etc. have already been documented by existing scholarship (Isaacs, 1975; Becker, 2009). Several authors argue that children name choice practices tend to be particularly important as they are not only markers of one’s personal, but also of one’s social identity; it represents a voluntary and desired identification with the host society on the part of immigrants (Gerhards & Hans, 2006 in Becker, 2009). On the other hand, in comparison with other forms of assimilation or integration which may require higher resource investments (e.g. learning a language), the choice of the first names are available free of charge to parents

(ibid.). Moreover, naming practices measure real behaviours, not only attitudes or intentions.

Furthermore, by naming their children traditional Irish names and by talking to them in English, parents may hope to reduce the so-called 'handicap' of the first generation of Romanian migrants in Ireland. From this perspective their separation from other Romanians and the Romanian culture suggests more than just a desire to escape the 'Romanian' label, but also as a strong desire to belong to the Irish society.

Last but not least, naming practices can also be explained by making a reference to Goffman's (1963) theory on stigmatised identities and 'passing' - the desire to become invisible by resembling as much as possible with the 'Other'.

Conclusions so far point to the fact that Romanians abroad, in spite of their good work ethos and their adaptability skills, also have many undesirable characteristics such as selfishness, individualism and lack of trust in other community members. These factors all seem to reflect and further contribute to a problematic identification with the Romanian identity label.

Speaking about their fellow-citizens 'at home', forum users feel that Romanians tend to be constantly unhappy, they always complain and criticise and they are also too pessimistic about their chances to have their say in turning the country's situation around. Blaming others for the disasters appears to be yet another well known feature of 'being Romanian' in the eyes of the forum members. In their view, Romanians like to self-pity and are obsessed with being persecuted

by others. This translates into a deeply embedded pessimism about the power to change their fate and the fate of the country they live in. One of the forum contributors describes these pessimistic people as grey shadows that crawl on crowded city streets in something that resembles a Dickensian landscape.

Online discussions highlight more other negative aspects. Reacting to the manifold media representations portraying Romanians as uncivilised and criminals, many forum users are upset and sad. However many also view that 'there is rarely smoke without fire'. They find that these categories of Romanians (i.e. 'the criminals and the uncivilised') carry most of the blame for our problematic image abroad and also for the fear that Westerners feel when they encounter Romanians. These reflections indicate how deeply the forum members are affected by having to 'share their citizenship' with people which they feel are not dignified to claim belonging to the same 'homeland' as them.

In a similar manner, the RCI forum members are trying to detach from the deeds of the Romanian criminals which tend to get over-representation in the foreign media. Forum participants discuss extensively about a so-called criminal nature ('culture') of Romanians where crime seems to be the ruling principle. They feel that Romanians abroad have already made a name for themselves in all sorts of illegal activities (stealing, card skimming, sex-trafficking, rape etc.) and this justifies to a certain degree the bad treatment we get from the whole community abroad.

Let's be honest, what can the Italians do if Romanians behave like animals? Don't try to tell me that it is their civic duty as hosts to give the immigrants free food, free accommodation, free drinks and their women. (2007 – M02)

In many instances encountered on the online discussion forum, Romanians have articulated a discourse emerging from a sense of inferiority about who they are and how they are treated. However some forum members acknowledge that in many situations we tend to underestimate ourselves and that perhaps Romanians need to feel more positive about who they are and struggle more to defend their sense of belonging:

We are Romanians and we have to show everybody that we are not less capable than 'the others' in any respect, and that we are a nation that knows what it wants. It's just that for so long the system has put its stamp on our way of thinking and everybody has taken advantage of us because of this. (2006 – F09)

Sometimes, while striving to mask their inferiority complex, Romanians online tend to move their discourse to the completely opposite direction and, as a consequence, they construct a superior and arrogant discourse when discussing Romanians' identities as opposed to 'the Others'. As one of the forum discussants remarks, Romanians usually oscillate between thinking that they are the smartest or the worst.

From the findings presented so far we can conclude that Romanianness understood as shared belonging in the great national discourse is not necessarily a treasured heritage. Being labelled as Romanian may have

stigmatising effects, and while some Romanians may choose the path of assimilation into the Irish society, others are striving to maintain their attachment to the homeland and to raise the profile of Romanianness by correcting the problematic aspects of the image that the Romanians have (or are thought to have) abroad. The following section sets out to explore the things that make Romanians proud of their ancestral home.

From hate to love... - Romania and the things that make us proud

The section of the article highlights the key aspects that make Romanians feel proud about their country and also the elements that generate a feeling of nostalgia when they talk about their 'homeland'. It also discusses the idea of patriotism and respect for the country.

In spite of the many aspects they dislike about their country of origin, Romanians are very proud about the beauty of their country and its landscapes. Seeing media representations (i.e. films, ads, internet short clips etc.) which feature Romania's beautiful sights make Romanians extremely proud.

Besides the national scenery, Romanians are also proud of the human talents emerging from their homeland, namely mathematicians, IT engineers, experienced medical staff and so on. Many names of famous Romanians have also been mentioned in different contexts on the forum. It is particularly the case of those who have made an excellent reputation and are well-known abroad. Among

the names mentioned are the members of the Galway Ensemble - ConTempo Quartet³; Herta Müller - the 2009 winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature⁴; and Dacian Ciolos - the current European Commissioner for Agriculture. These achievements of some of the most famous Romanians make the forum members extremely proud. It is sometimes uncertain whether some of these well-known personalities consider themselves representatives of Romania or not (as may be the case for example of Herta Müller). Regardless of this, Romanians seem to take pride in the achievements of some personalities which belong to a liminal zone of the Romanian cultural space.

Some Romanians in Ireland also feel that their cultural traditions make them proud and at the same time it also makes them feel distinct from 'the Others'. In particular the Christmas celebrations at home are unforgettable for many of the forum participants and for this particular reason they are deemed to be nearly impossible to be reproduced in exact detail in Ireland. The availability in Ireland of an increasing range of ethnic food products may make it easier for Romanians to acquire a better 'taste of home', however the nostalgia with which they recall the family Christmas traditions back home makes it impossible to recast the same rituals on a foreign land.

Other positive aspects that make Romanians proud of their national belonging are their language and culture as well as Romania's multiethnic profile which seems to be considered by the forum members as a great asset to their homeland. They feel that Romania's historical ethnic minorities (German, Hungarian, Turks

and Tatars) have given the country a cosmopolitan flavour even before other Western European countries became cosmopolitan as a consequence of economic migrations and asylum. Forum discussants mentioned that they would like to see more migration happening in Romania, but they express a strong preference for migration of a certain profile: fewer migrants from the east, more migrants from the West. This may be interpreted as a reversal of the current East-to-West migration trend and, at the same time, seeing Occidental migrants in Romania would act as a confirmation of the country's value. Consequently this would greatly improve the level of trust in the country's bright future and it would also bring the Romanian diaspora great pride in their country's appeal to 'the Others'.

Last but not least, some of Romanians online mention that as a nation we should take great pride in our history, which, they feel, goes a very long way back, allowing us track Romanians (or at least their ancestors) among the first peoples in Europe:

We will join the EU, but it is improper to say that we become a part of 'Europe' now, because we were in Europe long before others. The Dacians were not migrant people like the Gauls, the Germans, the Greek and the Celts [...]. (2004 – M01)

Findings presented so far seem to indicate that there are many aspects that are valued by diasporic Romanians in relation to their homeland. However many forum users question whether these aspects are sufficient in order to make Romanians to love their country and be proud of their Romanian

identity.

When discussing the issue of patriotism, some forum members argue that Romanians are not at all patriots since they refuse to associate with other Romanians or to participate in events organised by the Romanian Community. For these forum discussants, patriotism refers to a desire to spend time with other co-citizens either by participating in collective events or by doing volunteer work for the Romanian Community organisation.

This is however a rather skewed measure of patriotic feelings as some of the other forum members tend to argue. Lack of interest to partake in the Romanian Community events may be linked to the problematic organisation of the events, rather than a contestation of the importance of getting together. Due to the volunteer nature of the work carried out by Community members as well as restricted available funding, there is usually limited access to professional advertisement channels for Community's events, therefore the announcements rarely reach more than a handful of fellow-citizens. Moreover the events organised rarely have a wide scope that cater for the interests of all categories of Romanians in Ireland. The issue of social class becomes thus of key importance in this discussion.

Another explanation may also refer to the fact that the incentive to actively engage in community work may have also been greatly eroded during communism when volunteer work was forced upon Romanians and was a key source of free labour for the benefit of the state.

When discussing patriotic attitudes, several forum members felt that one

should not try to identify patriotism, by relying on stereotypic indicators:

In today's 21st century nobody could persuade me to sing the national hymn in public... and I don't think that this means I don't love my country. As well, nobody could convince me to listen to Romanian folk music on December 1st [the Romanian National Celebration] I don't like Romanian folk music [...] because I am interested in other styles of music. (2006 – F02)

For other forum participants, the signs of patriotism lie in people's most common everyday acts. For example being an honest person in a country where everybody is assumed to immoral and corrupt is thus considered a sign of love and respect for the country.

Last but not least forum members feel that patriotism is reflected also in the desire to return to Romania:

I honestly don't see myself as living abroad all my life... From time to time I keep telling myself that this [Ireland] is just a borrowed home... but it's not 'home'. (2006 – F02)

This last paragraph highlights in a very interesting manner the fact that patriotism may eventually reveal itself not through standard manifestations, but rather in a more silent way by keeping Romania as 'the true home' in our memories and by harbouring a deep respect and love for it in spite of its difficulties, for good and for bad times, in 'sickness and in health'.

Having to live remote from a homeland which is sometimes portrayed with great love and affection, makes some of the Romanians on the forum adopt a nostalgic tone when they talk about their country of origin.

Devlin Trew (2010: 541) argues that migrants engage in acts of remembering and re-imagining of their homeland and thus they re-create new homes and communities in the host environment. Nostalgia is thus not just an exercise of the memory, it is also a symbolic act. In a fascinating book which brings to the forefront the idea of the 'imagined homeland', Isabel Allende (2007 [2003]: 190) describes the process of construction of her Chilean homeland like this: 'I have constructed the image of my country just like a puzzle, picking those pieces that fit my goal and ignoring the others'. Thus, 'home' becomes more than a physical place, it is a home that travels with the subject, it is a sentimentalised space of belonging (Ahmed, 1999).

For diasporic Romanians, nostalgia is sometimes revealed when thinking about particular foods (in particular linked with Christmas traditions); when listening to a particular sort of music. In other cases nostalgia is unleashed when seeing Romania's landscape on TV (in promotional ads, documentaries or as filming locations). This creates a huge torment in some of the forum member's hearts, making them re-evaluate (even if just briefly) their decision to stay in Ireland or return 'home'.

When imagining their country in a nostalgic way, the bad memories seem to fade away and good ones take precedence:

Let's remember when we left Romania the good-bye words we said to all our dear ones: 'I'm sick of Romania. Here nothing happens and nothing can be done about it'. But things change after a while and we start to forget the desperate situation that we had to face then

and we think of Romania as the idyllic land of our childhood, the smell of Christmas cake, the sleigh rides, but apart from this the system still hasn't changed and unfortunately it is even worse than before. (2004 – M07)

In many situations, the mechanisms of nostalgia are complex and they blend more than one aspect. The following paragraphs were extracted from one of the forum discussions dedicated to the topic of nostalgia:

- For those of us born near our Carpathians; How do you survive this curse [referring to the curse of living away from the place of origin]? How long will we be able to take it? [...] Will we ever see those dear to us standing or will we just see a big lock on the front door upon our return? (M05)

- It is a weird feeling: when I was away from the country, I missed it, and now that I am back here [in Romania] for more than a year now, I am looking forward to leave it [...] I am 44 years old and I am the only daughter my parents have and now I see myself forced to leave them when they are so old [...] I have no other choice... But if you miss the country, come back for a short visit. You will get over your nostalgia. (F05)

- [...] In Ireland I get nostalgic about Romania, and when I come to Romania and I stay for a bit longer I start to miss Ireland. If I could bring here a few close relatives then for sure I will not need Romania at all [...]. (F13)

- 'The thing with the relatives is relative... [...] The fact that you succeed abroad and you can send them a small amount that ensures their survival counts much more than being together but poor.

Unfortunately one cannot have it all.' (F05)

Several interesting aspects emerge from this segment of conversation. On the one hand for some of the Romanians in Ireland there is a strong attachment to their homeland as a beautiful geographic space that becomes personalised: 'our Carpathians' (emphasis added). On the other hand there is the strong link to the family left behind which makes the forum participants realise that migration has involved a huge sacrifice of family ties. Hence, migration seems to be like a curse for those that fell in the trap of nostalgia.

However for some of the forum discussants, nostalgia fades away when one thinks about the financial hardships back home and also when one feels the burden of the duty towards their family. In this circumstance, some Romanians talk about living away from home as a Catch 22 situation: in spite of missing your country and the old life, one has a higher duty towards ensuring the family's welfare and therefore cannot return. Therefore happiness is never complete.

In conclusion, while there can be many negative aspects to highlight about their country and its people, Romanians in Ireland are also aware of the many aspects that make them proud of their national belonging. It is expected that gradually all these positive elements will constitute the foundation of a more positive feeling of belonging to the national discourse and equally a lesser stigma and shame attached to being Romanian:

The negative perception everyone has about Romanians and Romania could be changed in a few years' time as people changed their

perceptions about the Irish too. Many people say now that it is cool to be Irish, especially Americans: they all want to have Irish roots. Even Obama is supposed to have some Irish roots. And us, Romanians, we can also show the world that it's cool to be Romanian. We should be proud with our country. (2009 – F10)

Romanians in Ireland seem to have an intricate relation with their country and their co-citizens. This complex bond with their homeland unravels continuously through their discourse and it seems to resemble a puzzle image with many different facets, some good, and some bad:

For me there are two Romanias. One is written with capital 'R' and the other one is written with small caps 'r'. In the (R)omania (with capital letter) I include the Romanian university graduates, those people that work hard and are very appreciated in their workplaces and the communities they are part of. On the other hand we have the (r)omania (with no capital letter) that includes those that steal from ATMs and shops, those that beg on the streets, the bureaucracy that makes one waste their time [...] and the Romanians that are not open to other opinions than their own. (2007 – F07)

The arguments presented so far bring important clues in the process of discovering how Romanians in Ireland see their homeland. The interplay between 'love' and 'hate' seems to be the key aspect that frames their discourse about homeland.

Conclusion

This article highlights the great variety of discourses that Romanians in Ireland construct when they talk about their homeland and about their fellow-citizens. Findings point to the fact that no single and homogenous diasporic identity discourse could be identified on the forum. Thus, mapping the various discourses encountered on the online discussion forum constitutes an attempt to bring to the forefront the multiple ways in which the Romanian community in Ireland imagine and re-imagine their motherland. Data collected over a period of more than six years, indicates that migrants' relation to home is not frozen in time, but rather that the location and the meaning of 'homeland' are constantly being renegotiated. These findings thus confirm the key theoretical assumptions posed by the post-modern approach on identity.

Moreover, findings have pointed out to a great variety of 'Other' groups against which Romanians construct their identity discourses. This highlights the fact that the relational aspect of identity is particularly important when we discuss the complex process of construction and negotiation of diasporic identities. This article has focused in depth on one of these identity markers, namely the diasporic relation to the homeland. The homeland is important for Romanians in Ireland as it constitutes a common point of identification for most diasporians and it bears a strong imprint, as findings confirmed, on their diasporic narratives of identity.

While many studies have focused on the nostalgia felt by migrants

and diasporas in relation to their ancestral homes, very few studies have highlighted the fact that nostalgia is only one type of response developed by diasporas in relation to homeland. Thus, the challenge of analysing the Romanian narratives of home and belonging has been a fascinating task which brought to the surface both expected as well as many unexpected findings.

Relations between peoples in diasporas and their ancestral homelands are complex and full of dialectical contradictions. On the one hand it became evident from the findings presented in this article that many aspects mentioned by the forum members about Romania's realities were not positive. However the action to 'denounce' the weaknesses of the country of their origin is in many cases met with an equally significant reaction to defend the homeland against the harsh accusations and identify the positive aspects that render Romanians proud of their country.

It thus becomes immediately clear that these discourses about 'home' do not seem to have a neutral tone, but are rather charged with strong emotions. This seems to explain the sudden shifts from hate to love in the discourses that Romanians in Ireland have articulated on the forum.

Another key finding for this research is that there seems to be a significant link between the narratives of hate for their homeland and a negative image about their identities as Romanians. Stigma and feelings of shame have been expressed by members of the forum of the Romanian community in Ireland in many instances. The opposite was also noticed when feelings of national

pride have led to positive images about 'being Romanian' (or hope that in the future 'Romanianness will be cool'). This argument confirms Parekh's (2008) comments which highlight the idea that migrants' 'self-respect [...] is often inseparable from the respect for their country' (Parekh, 2008: 57).

In conclusion, this article has set out to assess the images that Romanians construct in their discourses of their ancestral home and their fellow-citizens. These findings have been interpreted mainly through the prism of the process of diasporic identity construction. The analysis has undoubtedly pointed to the complex and mixed feelings which Romanians have about their country of origin and, at the same time, the analysis has also confirmed the expected link between images of home and feelings of attachment or, quite the opposite, shame of their Romanianness.

Notes

¹ Totalling a number of 2,227 discussion threads and 25,151 posts (counted on May 31st 2010).

² The 'valley of sorrows' is a reference to one of the most popular Romanian children stories by Petre Ispirescu and entitled '*Tinerete fără bătrânețe, și viață fără de moarte*' [Youth without old age and life without death]. In the story, the 'valley of sorrows' [valea plangerii] represents the liminal space between two different worlds: the world of the living and the world of the immortals. It symbolises the trials and tribulations that one needs to surpass before achieving a superior state) in this case, immortality.

³ Formed in Galway, Ireland in 1995 by former students from the Music University in Bucharest (source <http://www.galwayensemble.ie>)

⁴ Romanian born German novelist, writing about the cruel realities of the Communist Regime in Romania (source <http://en.wikipedia.org>)

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