

**National identity in social network sites: A case study of a Romanian  
Facebook community**

by

Mihai Roşu

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## **Abstract**

This thesis investigates the ways in which national identity is being constructed, negotiated and re-defined discursively at a grassroots, horizontal level through the medium of social network sites. The analytical focus of this research are the vernacular understandings of national identity as they are expressed in an online environment. For this purpose, a virtual, social media community on Facebook specialized in landscape photography in Romania has been selected as a case study. Relying on Critical Discourse Analysis combined with other analytical approaches, the relations between nationalist discourses, reified landscape, nostalgia and archaism are disentangled. This research concludes that this particular online community is constructing a nation-brand based on archaism, which has the effect of removing the stigma attached to Romanian national identity, acting at the same time as a space of debate about the nation but also of escaping from perceived hardship into an idealized visual representation of the nation.

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## 1. Introduction

This thesis investigates the ways in which national identity is being constructed, negotiated and re-defined discursively at a grassroots, horizontal level through the medium of social network sites.<sup>1</sup> This thesis analyzes vernacular understandings of national identity as they are expressed in an online environment. For this purpose, a virtual, social media community on Facebook called "273 de locuri pe care trebuie să le vezi înainte să pleci din România"<sup>2</sup> (273 places you must see before you leave Romania, henceforth referred to as 273) has been selected as a case study. It is a virtual space that features mainly photographs of landscapes from Romania and users can share, like and comment on individual photographs.

The content of the website is organized in 'posts', which usually include both textual and visual information. A post is usually centered around a photograph, which has a caption attached to it. This caption usually includes the location where the photograph was made, the photographer and a description of sorts, which can range from a seasonal greeting, to a statement about the qualities of the objects represented in the photograph, to a quote from a poem or dictum by an author. This material, the photograph and the caption are selected by the community manager. The second part of the textual material, the comments, represent the direct input of the community members. This section allows users to express their thoughts and feelings on what has been posted.

This community operates through two websites: the main one, the first one to be established in August 2010 and with the highest number of members (over 434,000 likes at the time of writing), is in Romanian and targeted specifically to a Romanian audience; the other website

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<sup>1</sup> This subject was initially explored together with Savu Alin-Dumitru (MA Anthropology, National School of Political and Administrative Studies, Bucharest, Romania) and a short presentation on the topic was delivered jointly at the 12th International Postgraduate Conference on Central and Eastern Europe *Landscape and Environment in Central and Eastern Europe: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, organized by University College of London, Babeş-Bolyai University and the Romanian Academy and held in Cluj-Napoca, Romania between the 27th and 29th May 2013.

<sup>2</sup><https://www.facebook.com/273.ro>

is in English, it was established later in June 2012, has a much smaller audience (currently 22,000 likes) and is specifically targeted towards foreigners. Both websites follow the same structure and share much of the same visual material, but with differing captions. This enables a telling comparison between the way national identity is communicated towards and discussed within the in-group as opposed to the out-group.

This analysis of the virtual community will take into account all three elements of the content: the visual element represented by the photograph, the accompanying caption and the comments given by the members. It will look at the type of imagery used, the symbols present in it, the way it is framed by the community manager and the way member-users 'talk with' or 'talk about' the nation.

Because of the large amount of data present (since August 2010 there have been an average of 1 or 2 posts a day on the Romanian website), a sample has been chosen to be analyzed in depth. Since the website does not follow current events and the content does not seem to be influenced by it, rather following cyclical holidays, it seems logical to take as a sample a month in the year. From my preliminary analysis it was obvious that December is the month with most content and the holidays of that month (National Day, the commemoration of the 1989 Revolution and Christmas and New Year) and hence had the promise to provide the most relevant material for this investigation. In order to establish a baseline for interpretation, however, a more 'average', uneventful month, such as August was also included in the sample. Thus the sample consisted of all the posts and comments to them from December and August 2013 from both the main website and its English-language counterpart, as well as several topical albums, which shall be named when they will be analyzed.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Diasporas and the Internet

Studies of national identity and nationalism in the medium of the Internet have tended to focus on diasporas and their use of the Internet to organize and maintain contact with the home country. The growing body of literature on the subject<sup>3</sup> is usually framed by the theories of long-distance nationalism<sup>4</sup> and banal nationalism<sup>5</sup>. Methodologically, a range of analysis instruments is employed, often multiple ones in the same study. The most common methods employed are qualitative or discourse analysis of discussion threads on forums and emails, as well as surveys and face-to-face interviews. I have found one instance of a study done on social network sites (SNS)<sup>6</sup>, which used a survey to map out the connections between users of Facebook groups of the Basque diaspora and the self-reported importance of these online communities for their diasporic identities. Another study<sup>7</sup>, perhaps closer to my intentions, was done by the same author also on the Basque diaspora, but this time it was a qualitative content analysis of the websites of diasporic associations. What all these studies have in common is their mostly descriptive nature and rather superficial connections drawn between theory and primary data. This is because the literature so far has failed to take into account the relation between national identity (be it 'native' or diasporic) and globalization. What is missing is an in-depth discourse analysis of these online communities that clarifies their role in negotiating between national and diasporic identity discourses, on the one hand, and global

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<sup>3</sup>Chan, "Virtual Communities and Chinese National Identity"; De La Cruz, "Building Diaspora"; Ding, "Digital Diaspora and National Image Building"; Hiller and Franz, "New Ties, Old Ties and Lost Ties"; Alonso and Oiarzabal, *Diasporas in the New Media Age*; Oiarzabal, "Diaspora Basques and Online Social Networks"; Trandafoiu, *Diaspora Online*.

<sup>4</sup>Anderson, "Long-Distance Nationalism."

<sup>5</sup>Billig, *Banal Nationalism*.

<sup>6</sup>Oiarzabal, "Diaspora Basques and Online Social Networks."

<sup>7</sup>Oiarzabal, "Basque Diaspora Digital Nationalism. Designing 'Banal' Nationalism."



discourses and processes, on the other hand, while taking into account the mediating role the Internet has in enabling the contact between local and global discourses.

It is this theoretical gap that this thesis seeks to fill in. In order to explain the present case study as a part of this larger process, the focus needs to be shifted to the enabling discursive conditions that make national identity discourse as it appears in the 273 community possible. My hypothesis is that the key to making sense of this phenomenon is in the interaction between Western discourses on Romania as a nation and local discourses of collective identity. This interaction would have not been possible were it not for the global spread of a neo-liberal paradigm after the fall of communist regimes, which enabled and framed the subsequent (unequal) cultural exchange between Western countries and former communist ones. I will return to discussing these exchanges and the adaptation of national identity discourses to a neo-liberal paradigm in the section about globalization and nation-branding. But before that, I will proceed with a more elementary discussion on the construction of national identity theories.

## **2.2 National identity**

The body of literature on nationalism has covered well the construction of national identities. Most of the work in this regard starts from either a institutionalist or structuralist stance and follows a top-down, elite-driven perspective to nation-building.<sup>8</sup> Social constructivist approaches to nationalism have completed these efforts by taking a bottom-up perspective to national identity construction, looking at how nationalist discourse is appropriated by its audience and nationhood reproduced daily. The grounding work in this respect was done by Michael Billig,<sup>9</sup> who draws attention the ways in which 'nationness' is taken for granted both by 'ordinary people' and scientists. Billig posits that nationhood is reproduced everyday

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<sup>8</sup>Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Gellner, *Nationalism*; Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*.

<sup>9</sup>Billig, *Banal Nationalism*.

through mindless 'flaggings' , that through daily remembrance and forgetting become a 'habitus', dispositions and practices that become second-nature through mindless routine. Examples of such mindless 'flaggings' are the flags that hang permanently outside public buildings, the 'Pledge of Allegiance' that US schoolchildren take every morning or the national coat of arms that adorn classrooms in other parts of the world. The routine and permanent presence of these markers of national identity allows them to become invisible to audience it addresses. However, just because they become invisible does not mean that they become ineffective. These markers can become invisible only if the identity they express becomes unanimously accepted and ceases to be a point of contention.

Criticism has been raised to several dimensions of Billig's theory.<sup>10</sup>First of all, the relation between the media that feeds 'banal nationalism' and its audience is too simplistic and lacks any dynamism. Too much emphasis is given to institutionalized discourses and too little attention is given to popular expressions of national identity, which show much more variance and internal divisions. Moreover, the relationship between banal nationalism and globalization needs to be detailed. It is following this line of criticism that I have conducted my research: I have paid special attention to the way member-users relate the content created by the community to their national identity, the internal cleavages that surface (or are omitted) in this virtual space and most importantly, the relation between the self-image constructed within this community and the Western perception of Romania as a nation, which links my research to the topic of globalization as a global dialogue of discourses.

A caveat needs to be made with respect to the use of banal nationalism because, as I shall exemplify later, markings of nationhood tend to vary from the explicit to the unconscious. Nationality is sometimes brought to the forefront and discussed openly, and sometimes it is left in the background and the content is framed and discussed in terms of other dimensions,

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<sup>10</sup>Skey, "The National in Everyday Life."

such as aesthetic value, nostalgia, tourism and others. This begs the question: when is national identity more overt and when does it recede into the background? In other words, when and how is the transition made between banal and hot nationalism?

Jon Fox and Cynthia Miller-Idriss <sup>11</sup> have outlined four principal ways in which nationhood is continuously reproduced on a day to day basis: talking the nation, consuming the nation, performing the nation and choosing the nation. The first two are relevant for my research, since member-users talk about the nation per se or simply discuss things in a nationally framed way and it also an instance of how they 'consume the nation' because the content that appears on the communities' virtual interface frames the nation or constituents thereof into a brand that is ready to be consumed. The distinction between talking about and talking with the nation stresses the difference between using the nation as a concept to interpret the world <sup>12</sup> and talking about the nation explicitly (by analogy, the same can be said about consumption). This conceptual differentiation helps to refine the framework of banal nationalism and to distinguish between blatant and banal nationalisms.

### **2.3 Landscape and national identity**

Moving from abstract theory to more grounded research, an important question this thesis will have to answer is the relation between landscape, understood as "a set of cultural representations of the land" <sup>13</sup> and national identity.

Amongst other things, Tim Edensor tackles this issue in *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life*.<sup>14</sup> By deconstructing the geographical component of the national identity vocabulary, he shows that it is based on the language of home and domesticity, which enables the presentation of the nation as 'home' and hence to draw on the emotions of safety and

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<sup>11</sup>Fox and Miller-Idriss, "Everyday Nationhood."

<sup>12</sup>Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov, "Ethnicity as Cognition."

<sup>13</sup>Ely, *This Meager Nature*, 226.

<sup>14</sup>Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life*.

comfort associated with the home. This insight draws attention to the way in which landscape is domesticized and how it is possible for a concrete, local feature to be presented as part of greater national whole.

The relation between local landscapes and the national has already been investigated by Anthony D. Smith.<sup>15</sup> The books shows how artistic representations of the land between the 17th and 19th centuries have been appropriated by nationalist elites (regardless of the author's intent) in order "to give concrete sociological expression to the idea of a national community rooted in its own distinctive homeland and extending across a culturally defined territory" (p.106-7). Through these paintings, the abstract idea of a nation was made concrete by establishing a metonymical relation between the local and the national: the local is a small-scale representation of the national, and the national is concentrated in the local. The parallel to the case-study at hand is obvious: the geographical tag of each photo provides a representation of a concrete piece of land that can be interpreted as part and parcel of a national territory, becoming part of a wider conglomeration of images that become the visual expression of an imagined community.<sup>16</sup>

Another relevant research in this field of inquiry, this time done in a historical perspective, is Christopher Ely's work on landscape and national identity in Imperial Russia.<sup>17</sup> Taking landscape to be "a product of culture and history",<sup>18</sup> the author shows how the Russian cultural elite adopted the Western concept of landscape in the early 19th century and compared the Russian landscape to the Western one on the West's own terms, only for the Russian landscape to appear lacking in such a comparison. Nationalist discourse kept the concept and premises, but reversed the value judgment via a strategy of emphasizing

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<sup>15</sup>Smith, *The Nation Made Real*.

<sup>16</sup>Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

<sup>17</sup>Ely, *This Meager Nature*.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 10.

'inner/metaphysical beauty', in contrast to the 'superficial beauty' of the Western landscape. This study shows how landscape can become part of nationalist discourse, which appeared and evolved as a counter-discourse to the Western perception of Russian territory as boring, meager, miserable and unattractive. My argument runs parallel to Ely's, meaning that what is constructed within the 273 community is a counter-discourse to the Western perception of Romania, which by Western standards appears as backward, uncivilized and without any redeeming features. The community at hand has embraced the premises underlying this perception, but is trying to turn the value judgment against itself, by presenting landscape as a redeeming feature of national character.

## 2.4 Globalization and national identity

Work on the relation between national identity and globalization has been done by Michael Skey in *National Belonging and Everyday Life*.<sup>19</sup> The value of this work for this thesis lies in its relationing of national identity to globalization as it is perceived by a 'titular' national group, namely white middle-class Britons. The argument of this book is that by affirming national identity through banal practices and everyday talk nationalism provides ontological security to a group which perceives that its cultural capital is diminishing because of the anti-national character of globalization, working through cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism. It is plausible that such a dynamic underlies the activity of the 273 community, which explicitly presents itself as a reaction to emigration, which is presented as weakening the national community. How exactly this dynamic unfolds in the virtual space of the webpage will be described in the empirical part of the thesis.

A corpus of literature in which an in-depth discussion of the relation between national identity and globalization has taken place is in studies of nation-branding done from a cultural studies

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<sup>19</sup>Skey, *National Belonging and Everyday Life*.

perspective. With respect to the post-communist European region, the book edited by Nadia Kaneva<sup>20</sup> is the main reference point. The editor clarifies the relationship between national identity and globalization in this part of the world through the concept of 'transition', defined as "the ideological project of post-communist national identity construction",<sup>21</sup> which sought to replace a shameful identity with a more desirable one. Nation-branding as a instrument of state power offered the chance for local narratives of national identity to be communicated to the hegemonic West within the accepted neo-liberal orthodoxy, which demanded the marketization of identities. Although it has no connection to the state per se, I will argue later that the logic of nation-branding described above has been appropriated at a grassroots level and that 273 represents a horizontal attempt to engage in a global discourse on local terms by creating a locally desirable national brand. The ways in which this grassroots nation-branding resembles and diverges from previous top-down attempts<sup>22</sup> one of the investigative avenues of the thesis.

## 2.5 Social network sites

Finally, any interpretative analysis of virtual communities will have to address the constraints and specificities of the Internet (and Facebook in particular) as a medium of communication. One way to think about the social meaning of websites such as Facebook is to conceptualize them as "networked publics," that is "spaces and audiences that are bound together through technological networks".<sup>23</sup> What differentiates networked publics from unmediated publics or other media such as television, radio or newspapers are the following four characteristics: persistence, searchability, replicability and invisible audiences.<sup>24</sup> Also, in contrast to

<sup>20</sup>Kaneva, *Branding Post-Communist Nations*.

<sup>21</sup>Kaneva, "Nation-Branding in Post-Communist Europe: Identities, Markets and Democracy," 7.

<sup>22</sup> For analyses of such cases see Kaneva and Popescu, "National Identity Lite"; Bârdan and Imre, "Vampire Branding: Romania's Dark Destinations."

<sup>23</sup>boyd, *Why Youth (Heart) Social Network Sites*, 125.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 126.

television, radio and the press and like unmediated publics, networked publics facilitate the multidirectional interaction between participants, thus enabling sociability.

This makes Facebook as a whole, as well as its distinct parts such as community pages and individual profiles, social spaces <sup>25</sup>. Group pages, such as this case study, open to all users and even accessible by non-users are a public sphere where users can share content and discuss, creating thus as a computer-mediated public-sphere.<sup>26</sup>

While previous research of this kind has been done on forum webpages, where content is structured in discussion threads, with each thread having a distinct subject, the flexible structure of Facebook means that any profile, be it of a physical person, of a commercial company, of an artist or a community page such as 273, acts simultaneously as a profile and a forum. The owner of a profile may invite their audience to share their thoughts on a topic through a post on their Wall, but in the case of 273, rarely is there an explicit invitation to a discussion on a precise topic, rather discussions in the comments tend to ensue more spontaneously, with the original post serving just as a pretext. Moreover, several distinct discussions may be ongoing in the comments for the same post, making this community page a rather unstructured public space, as least in terms of input from the audience.

There is another aspect of the nature of SNS that complicate matters and that is the relation between private and public. The audience interacts on the community page through their personal profiles. While it is possible to create a fake profile or include fake information, because of the way Facebook came to life and gathered its popularity<sup>27</sup> most people make a profile with their real names, include real social and demographic information about themselves and make online Friends<sup>28</sup> with their offline friends. Moreover, the way a

<sup>25</sup>boyd and Ellison, "Social Network Sites," 221.

<sup>26</sup>Byrne, "The Future of (the)'race'."

<sup>27</sup>boyd et al., "The Conundrum of Visibility"; boyd, *Why Youth (Heart) Social Network Sites*.

<sup>28</sup>Baym and boyd, "Socially Mediated Publicness."

community page on Facebook works is that it gathers 'likes' through people's social networks, a virtual equivalent of word-of-mouth. This is unlike a classic forum where users usually interact through pseudonyms and where the site has no mapping of the Friend network of each user, which means that user's cannot see each other's social connections. This infrastructural setup blurs the line between public and private and it is for this reason that a short discussion on the concepts of mediated publicness and imagined audience is necessary.

Users may or may not be aware that their presence on 273 (likes, comments, shares) is visible to all other users.<sup>29</sup> The way users imagine their audience is, who will see their activity, who will read their comments and the people to whom they address certain actions influences the way activity online and how they talk.<sup>30</sup>

The ethnographic work done by Daniel Miller and Don Slater<sup>31</sup> on the use of the Internet in Trinidad makes an important point about the role of the Internet in mediating between local nationalism and globalization: rather than attenuating nationalism by making people more cosmopolitan, access to the Internet seems to increase the salience of national identity because it puts local identities in direct contact with other equivalents from across the globe, making the Internet an arena in which national identity can be asserted against cosmopolitan globalization. Furthermore, in relation specifically to Facebook, Daniel Miller<sup>32</sup> draws an interesting parallel between Facebook and the Kula Ring as described by Nancy Munn in *The Fame of Gawa*.<sup>33</sup> The parallel is that, just as the circulation of Kula increases the fame of its maker and of the community they are part of, so Facebook is the medium through which the fame of an individual and their community is spread and augmented.

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<sup>29</sup>Acquisti and Gross, "Imagined Communities."

<sup>30</sup>Litt, "*Knock, Knock* . Who's There?"

<sup>31</sup>Miller and Slater, *The Internet*.

<sup>32</sup>Miller, *Tales from Facebook*.

<sup>33</sup>Munn, *The Fame of Gawa*.



## 2.6 Responses to stigmatization

The very name of the community and the motives behind its creation, as stated by the community manager in several interviews,<sup>34</sup> makes it clear that the community positions itself against a more generally prevailing discourse of (perceived) stigmatization of Romanian emigrants.<sup>35</sup> For this reason, several important questions this research had to take into account were: How is stigmatization perceived within this community? and What strategies of dealing with this stigma are expressed?

273 creates a nationally-defined public sphere through deictical markers (the title itself and the language used) as well as through the content itself, which gives a concrete visual expression to the nation. The content is not only nationally-defined, it also invokes very often nostalgia by using markers associate with childhood and/or 'a glorious past' (images of children and old people in traditional folk costume, traditional dishes, traditional rural architecture or 'ruins' in a romantic sense). These two characteristics, national-boundedness and nostalgia marks 273 as a space where it is safe and even encouraged to express identification and connectedness with 'Romania' (see the concept of 'phatic culture' in social media sites by Vincent Miller<sup>36</sup>), to reflect upon and discuss one's national belonging. This makes it a highly appropriate space in which to study the perception of stigma, the way members rationalize and interpret this stigma and most importantly, how they negotiate stigma in order to achieve a positive sense of self.

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<sup>34</sup>Săvuică, De ce 273? Trebuie sa plecam din Romania? Interviu cu Magda Savuica; Săvuică, Interviu Magda Savuica pentru Student Times.

<sup>35</sup>see Woodcock, "Romania and EUrope"; Morosanu and Fox, "No Smoke without Fire."

<sup>36</sup>Miller, "New Media, Networking and Phatic Culture."

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Introduction and limitations of the data

The images posted by the webmaster, the captions, the descriptions, and the comments of the users form a text informed by the discourses present in society. I cannot make any inferences about what individuals think, except to the extent they express their opinion on a matter and contribute to the text of 273. Since this text is a result of different discourses that affect the many contributors and of other social, political and economical forces, 273 can be read as what Marx called a 'social hieroglyph', "an emblem of the social relations it conceals".<sup>37</sup> The purpose of this research is to describe this text and to analyze the discursive forces that brought it into being. Since SNSs are a realm of representation par excellence, and this case study deals primarily with the cultural representation of physical space known as 'landscape', which is heavily informed by the order of discourse of nationhood, a discourse analytical approach is the most suitable tool to disentangle the various discourses that concur to create this text.

The research question guiding this thesis will be how are different discourses of nationhood articulated and negotiated between the member-users of this website. Before moving on with the presentation of the different schools of discourse analysis a few words must be said about the limitations of the data. First of all, the webmaster can edit or delete a post at any time after publishing it and can delete the comments of any user. Similarly, users can edit or delete their own comments at a later date. Given this situation, I can only analyze the text as it is presented to me at the time of research. However, this should not be a problem as the posts and comments from the sample I am using are at least a few months old, and it is very

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<sup>37</sup>Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," 15.

unlikely that the webmaster or any user will revisit these old posts and comments given the large amount of content that the website produces.

Secondly, as I am interested in the larger discourses and social processes that enable the existence of this website and its activity, I have complemented the relevant literature with my own insider knowledge of Romanian culture, of everyday talk in order to make sense of the body of data from the website. Indeed, without such insider knowledge it would have been impossible to understand all the cultural references of the text, without which any interpretation of it would be incomplete.

### 3.2 Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory

Any discourse analytical approach owes its debt to Michel Foucault's work on the archeology<sup>38</sup> and genealogy of knowledge.<sup>39</sup> Stepping away from previous uses of the word 'discourse' from sociology and conversation analysis,<sup>40</sup> Foucault used discourse to refer to a "relatively rule-bound sets of statements which impose limits on what gives meaning [...] truth being something which is, at least to a large extent, created discursively".<sup>41</sup> In other words, discourse represents the limits of what can be written, spoken and thought at specific period in time, in a specific setting.<sup>42</sup> This conception of discourse is not just restrictive of thought but also productive, in that it makes possible certain interpretations of the world. This brings into discussion the concept of subject and the process of subjectification. Through the lens of discourse it is no longer possible to think of the subject as an autonomous, sovereign entity endowed with agency. The subject becomes a product of discourse. With this ontology in

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<sup>38</sup>Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

<sup>39</sup>Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

<sup>40</sup>McHoul and Grace, *A Foucault Primer*, 26–31.

<sup>41</sup>Jorgensen and Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, 13.

<sup>42</sup>McHoul and Grace, *A Foucault Primer*, 31.

mind it is possible to trace in text the type of subject it interpellates,<sup>43</sup> the frame used to produce that subjectivity<sup>44</sup> and the discourses that make that subject possible.

The role of discourse and subjectivity in the construction of individual and collective identities has been explored from a post-structuralist perspective by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.<sup>45</sup> The two authors expand Foucault's work by de-stabilizing both discourse and subject: there is never just one discourse, several are always competing and the subject, although constructed, is not a stable category, it is fragmented, because one person may be interpellated according to different subject positions depending on the context and the discourses that shape that respective context.<sup>46</sup> The subject is thus always fragmented and acquires an identity only by being represented discursively. "Identity is thus identification with a subject position in a discursive structure,"<sup>47</sup> which is constituted by signifiers linked through chains of equivalence organized around nodal points. Identity is thus always relational, changeable, fragmented and contingent.<sup>48</sup> Another process that is part of group formation is representation. The representation of a group entails with it an understanding of society as a whole. Different ways of understanding the world will lead to the formation of different groups, which may or coexist side by side, or may, in certain situations, be mutually exclusive, in which a social antagonism arises. If, on the other hand, one discourse is accepted to such a large extent that its existence is not put into question and there are no alternatives to it, then that discourse is hegemonic.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>see Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)."

<sup>44</sup> For more on Critical Frame Analysis see Bacchi, *Foucault, Policy and Rule: Challenging the Problem Solving Approach*; Verloo, "Mainstreaming Gender Equality in Europe. A Critical Frame Analysis"; Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm."

<sup>45</sup>Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 115.

<sup>47</sup>Jorgensen and Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, 43.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 45–49.

Although Laclau and Mouffe were not concerned with practical analysis and instead focused on discourse as an abstract entity, the above-described vocabulary of group formation, identity, representation, nodal points, chains of equivalence, antagonism and hegemony can be applied to textual analysis.<sup>50</sup>

Starting from this, collective identities are formed by reducing the number of possible subject positions individuals can occupy in a given setting. This takes place by creating chains of equivalence according to a logic of equivalence or logic of difference.<sup>51</sup> The chains of equivalence mechanism can be thought of as the discursive enactment of the boundary contraction and expansion that Andreas Wimmer talks about on the subject of the maintenance of ethnic boundaries.<sup>52</sup>

### 3.3 Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) focuses on the interaction between discourse, understood as language-in-use and cultural and social developments. The label encompasses several approaches by different authors (Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak, Teun van Dijk) which, for all their differences, share a few basic premises:<sup>53</sup> 1) discourse refers to the production and consumption of text and that these discursive practices partly constitute social phenomena; 2) discourse both constitutes social practices and is constituted by non-discursive social practices in a dialectical relation; 3) discourse analysis should be preoccupied with the analysis of linguistic analysis of concrete, empirical texts in their social interaction; 4) discourse has ideological effects, meaning that it produces and reproduces unequal power relations between social categories; 5) CDA does not view itself as politically neutral, but as critical of existing power relations and committed to social change.

<sup>50</sup>For an example see Ibid., 51–57.

<sup>51</sup>Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 127–129.

<sup>52</sup>Wimmer, “Elementary Strategies of Ethnic Boundary Making.”

<sup>53</sup>Jorgensen and Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, 61–64.

For the next part of the discussion I will be referring to Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model.<sup>54</sup> The three elements of the model are text, discursive practice and social practice. Text refers to a concrete, specific instance of language use, a communicative event. In the present case-study that may be a post or a comment. The discursive practice refers to the discourses and genres that are involved in the production and consumption of texts. The configuration of discursive practices in a social field forms an order of discourse.<sup>55</sup> The interaction of a discursive practice and another, non-discursive mechanism (be it economic, physical, psychological, biological, etc.) creates a social practice. The goal of CDA is to bring to light the relation between a communicative event and the order of discourse, between language use and social practice.<sup>56</sup>

The relation between the two concepts is always dialectical: when a person makes use of language they are drawing on a particular system, on a discourse, so the communicative event is constituted by the order of discourse. However, in accomplishing such a communicative event, the order of discourse is reproduced and, in circumstances of interdiscursivity (when discourses and genres from different orders are combined), it can also change the order of discourse.<sup>57</sup>

The theoretical assumption of CDA is that public spheres, such as the online sphere of 273, are sites of social interaction and that texts are the result of that interaction. This means that the texts produced within the 273 website reflect a "knowledge base"<sup>58</sup> that was constituted offline. These texts embody, at an immediate level, norms of language use - discourses and genres, which in turn convey information about the larger social processes that set these norms. Members of the online community draw upon pre-existing discursive practices, each a

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<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 67–71.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 72.

<sup>56</sup>Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse*, 16–30.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 30–46.

<sup>58</sup>Byrne, "The Future of (the)'race'," 24.

product of a social and cultural history, and within this virtual space meanings are states, compared, negotiated and, ultimately, new discourses arise. The way language is employed by any one speaker is not a chance occurrence, nor is it a predetermined result of their subject position and the limits of the discourse they are speaking in. Language, according to Wodak et al. is used in different ways which they call strategies.<sup>59</sup> Strategies are "more or less accurate plans adopted to achieve a certain political, psychological or other kind of objective".<sup>60</sup> The level to which a speaker is conscious of their intentions and the way they arrange language differs from context to context. It is safe to say that this level is higher for prepared texts intended to be consumed by an audience, such as a political speech or post by the webmaster in the case at hand, whereas this level is lower for individual contributions to group discussions in an informal setting, which is what the comments section of each post approximates. Strategies are thus more or less voluntarily used, but ultimately determined by processes of subjectification and the limits of discourse.

Different types of strategy exist corresponding to different types of social macro-functions of discourse.<sup>61</sup> In the discursive construction of national identity, the following types of macro-strategies have been identified by Wodak et al.<sup>62</sup>: constructive strategies, which "establish a certain national identity by promoting unification, identification and solidarity, as well as differentiation"<sup>63</sup>; strategies of transformation, which dismantle elements of a given national identity in order to reassemble it into a new shape; strategies of assimilation, which construct homogeneity and strategies of dissimulation which construct heterogeneity. The latter two strategies can have constructive, destructive, perpetuating or justifying social functions. These

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<sup>59</sup>Wodak, *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*, 30–35.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 31.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 7–10.

<sup>62</sup>for a more comprehensive discussion see Ibid., 30–47.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 33.

concepts will be applied to the data taken from the 273 website and I will investigate which strategies and argumentation schemes are used to which effects on national identity.

### **3.4 Discursive psychology**

Discursive psychology is the last approach I will be discussing in this chapter. Unlike the other methods outlined above, discursive psychology originated within the field of social psychology as a challenge to cognitivism. Sharing the same social constructivist philosophical basis as all other discourse analysis methods, discursive psychology attacked cognitivism for underestimating the social origin of individual psychology. It criticized the tendency to reify certain observed or theorized phenomena as internal mechanisms, universally applied, without checking for inter-cultural variability.<sup>64</sup> In relation to research on attitudes the critique was that the cognitivist paradigm took attitudes as the result of internal, individual processes and that language is merely an expression of those attitudes. By contrast, discursive psychology argues that attitudes are contingent products of social interaction, with great variability from one social context to another and that language is not a reflection, but is constitutive of individual experiences and of subjective reality.<sup>65</sup>

For these reasons, discursive psychology places heavy emphasis on language in use, on the contextual use of language, which is what it defines as discourse. In this regard, it is similar to critical discourse analysis, but unlike CDA, this method does not focus on the linguistic characteristic of language, but on the rhetorical use thereof. This is where the key concept of interpretative repertoire comes in. Unlike the other approaches described above, which place emphasis on structure, discursive psychology makes room for agency by conceptualizing of discourse as highly context-bound, meaning that although it is constitutive of the subject, in concrete social situation subjects have a choice between different parts of discourse which

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<sup>64</sup>Jorgensen and Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, 98–101.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, 102.



they can manipulate to convince or dissuade others. An interpretative repertoire is thus defined as "a culturally familiar and habitual line of argument comprised from recognisable themes, common places and tropes (doxa)."<sup>66</sup> People can use these subdivisions of discourse, these clusters of themes, arguments and tropes as flexible resources in order to construct a version of reality in a certain situation.<sup>67</sup> This concept bears great similarity to that of strategy from CDA which was discussed earlier. The difference between them is one of tone: interpretative repertoire is more vague and refers to something more akin to a semantic field, implying the chain of association from Laclau and Mouffe's post-structuralist approach whereas strategy is more precise and refers to a specific way of arranging signs. These similarities and differences make the two concepts highly compatible and, to some extent, complementary, which is why I will be using both these concepts in my analysis of the data.

This approach enables much greater flexibility in discursive interaction that can better capture the hybrid, disjointed, multi-author and open-ended structure of the text I am dealing with. However, the methodology of applying discursive analysis relies heavily on the immediate context of the utterance, which is why its primary method is conversational analysis of interviews or conversations.<sup>68</sup> While the 273 website, with its basic structure of photograph-description-comments approximates something resembling a conversation and creates a communicational context unto itself, the ontological priority given to agency by discursive psychology means that application of it implies for the analyst to be present when the communicative event takes place, which is impossible in a virtual environment, in the networked public of Facebook characterized by persistence, searchability, replicability and invisible audiences.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>Wetherell, "Positioning and Interpretative Repertoires."

<sup>67</sup>Jorgensen and Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, 107.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 120–122.

<sup>69</sup>boyd, "Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics and Implications."

However, since the ontological premises are the same, an interpretative repertoire is as much a structural factor as a resource for an agent. Interpretative repertoires are, in the end, parts of larger, more abstract discourses, which makes this concept suitable for use even in a more decidedly post-structuralist approach.

## 4. The main deictical elements

### 4.1 Title and Motto

The title is the first thing that catches one's attention and delineates the purpose and the tone of subsequent discussion. The first part of the title, '273 places to see', marks the subject of the page, invoking a geographical and tourism frame. The peculiar and somewhat pessimistic second part of the title, 'before you leave Romania', was explained by the creator of the webpage as a dedication to a brother who was about to emigrate to England.<sup>70</sup> This personal anecdote illustrates a broader process of migration and globalization. The implication of this widespread experience in the title, the national delineation and tourist frame already set up the webpage as a space in which users can express their national identity and discuss about 'national' issues.

The motto of the page, present in the 'About' section just below the title is a quote from the Bible, from 2 Chronicles 7:14: "If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land."<sup>71</sup>

The motto introduces three central concepts, that of 'God', 'people' and 'land'. It establishes a hierarchical relation between the 'God' and 'people', the latter of whom are in possession of a 'land'. The message from this motto is that any improvement of the 'people' and of their 'land' will require deference to the Christian God. Interpreted through the national and touristic frame given by the title, this biblical extract imprints both a national and sacral character to the geographical element, its representation, i.e. landscape, becoming simultaneously an object of national possession and of religious reverence. In this text, the existence of the

<sup>70</sup>Săvuică, De ce 273? Trebuie să plecăm din România? Interviu cu Magda Savuică.

<sup>71</sup>... "dacă poporul Meu peste care este chemat Numele Meu se va smeri, se va ruga, și va căuta Fața Mea, și se va abate de la căile lui rele, – îl voi asculta din ceruri, îi voi ierta păcatul, și-i voi tămădui țara." 2 Cronici 7:14

'people' is sanctioned by a higher, supernatural power and the 'land' exists only in relation to the 'people', as if the physical, geographical element has an intrinsic national character to it, without which it could not exist.

#### 4.2 Interviews with the webmaster

In an interview the creator of the webpage explains the choice of the motto: "[...] I became convinced that God is the only one that can bring hope there where there is no beam of light. It works for ruined lives, it works for hopeless cases, why wouldn't it also work for a nation?"<sup>72</sup> Unsurprisingly, the interviewee employs an essentialist, groupist<sup>73</sup> interpretative repertoire of nations as bounded entities, as things-in-the-world. By conceptualizing what is, by definition, a collective entity as a bounded individual unit the possibility is opened for the transfer of the Christian redemption trope from the individual to the imagined community. Groupism makes possible the combination of a religious discourse of salvation with a nationalist discourse. The way the interviewee summarizes the motto makes this connection clear: "[...] get close to God and you and your country will be well."<sup>74</sup>

The entanglement of religious feeling and national identity is superimposed on the landscape because 'land' is the connecting element between 'God' and 'people'. This constructs a very peculiar conception of landscape, as it is characterized not only as national, but also as sacred.

The two interviews posted by the community manager in the Notes section of the website contours the main elements of the discourse that is constructed in this virtual community. In an interview from March 2012 for Student Times, when asked how the idea for this website came to be, the community manager answered:

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<sup>72</sup> *am înțeles că Dumnezeu este singurul care poate să aducă o speranță acolo unde nu se mai întrevăde nici o urmă de lumină. Funcționează în vieți distruse, funcționează în cazuri fără speranță, de ce nu ar funcționa și în situația unei națiuni?* in Săvuică, Interviu Magda Savuica pentru Student Times.

<sup>73</sup> Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups*.

<sup>74</sup> *"apropie-te de Dumnezeu și ție și țării tale îi va fi bine."* in Săvuică, Interviu Magda Savuica pentru Student Times.

"The idea started from childhood when my parents instilled in me the desire to see the good things in everything that surrounds me and to remain optimistic through the hardships I am facing now. Later I discovered that we need both God and nation in order to have a better life, to gain another perspective on life. I associated these thoughts with the love for people, with my passion for undiscovered places in my hometown, in my country. All of these led to the creation of the 273 project in August 2010"<sup>75</sup>

The first theme in this extract is that of childhood, connected to the theme of parents, or more generally ancestors. Anyone exploring this virtual space will not fail to notice the recurrence of photographs featuring children dressed in folk costumes, playing or posing either in nature or around a traditional rural household. The use of the theme of childhood and ancestors make for a nostalgic impression upon the viewer. The presence of children in photographs and the evocation of ancestry through folk costumes and pre-communist rural architecture simultaneously resonates on a personal level with the communities audience, Romanian nationals, tapping into their personal experiences of childhood, grandparents and rural life, and relates this personal nostalgia to a more abstract sense of nostalgia related to the nation by giving a concrete, visual expression to an abstract 'golden age' of national tradition.

The second theme encountered in this extract is that of optimism, which is a clear feature of the visual style of the community, in which aesthetic appeal and the rendering invisible of any negative aspects are the main criteria of success. Indeed, in another interview, the community manager declares that the purpose of the website is "to promote [...] amongst the Romanians a positive, encouraging spirit. A vision for the future."<sup>76</sup> But what does optimism mean in this case? Judging from these two interviews, optimism is about maintaining a positive attitude and focusing on good aspects instead of the negative ones. This optimism is made dependent on two conditions in the subsequent sentence: 'God' and 'nation'. The religious nationalism expressed in this case is not remarkable just by its mere presence, but mostly because of the

<sup>75</sup>"Ideea a pornit din copilărie când ai mei au pus în mine dorința de a vedea lucrurile bune în ceea ce mă înconjoară, și din a fi optimistă privind greutățile prin care trec acum. Mai târziu am înțeles că avem nevoie de Dumnezeu ca și națiune pentru un trai mai bun, pentru o altă perspectivă asupra vieții. Am asociat aceste gânduri cu dragostea pentru oameni, cu pasiunea mea pentru locurile nedescoperite din orașul meu, din țara mea. Toate acestea au dus la crearea proiectului 273 în august 2010" in Ibid.

<sup>76</sup>Asta vrem să promovăm cu 273. Printre romani, un spirit pozitiv, încurajator. O viziune pentru mai departe. In Săvuică, De ce 273? Trebuie să plecăm din România? Interviu cu Magda Savuica.

tone it is phrased in: while state-driven religious nationalism usually is centered on the sacrifice of the individual for the greater good, in this case, the individual reigns supreme and religion and nation are necessary for a good individual life. This can be thought of as the individual, private appropriation of a state-driven, communitarian discourse.

On the other hand, it is worth noting that this individualistic tone is highly appropriate for the structure of the virtual community. Technically speaking, Facebook is just the software provided by a company, but the use of this software is not in the hands of the company that makes it, it is in the hands of users to make use of the tools it makes available to them: the making of profiles and the making of lists of Friends.<sup>77</sup> In other words, Facebook works by mapping out the social network of each user, thus "writing into being" egocentric networks.<sup>78</sup> The popularization of an item such as 273 in the medium of Facebook happens by making an individual endorsement ( a 'like' or a 'share') public to one's Friends, which encourages them to do the same, thus making the item visible to another network of Friends, thus in effect aggregating these egocentric networks. Since the make-up of the individual profile and the hints provided by the company for its completion encourage users to adopt a neo-liberal market logic to their self-presentation and create a personal brand that competes for attention within this network of networks that is Facebook,<sup>79</sup> it follows that discourses that share the bias of the infrastructure, namely the neo-liberal premise of improving individual competitiveness in a market setting will be more likely to successfully proliferate.

When asked about the message of the website, the author goes into a nationalist diatribe that would fit perfectly into a school celebration of a national holiday in the latter years of the Ceaușescu regime. The nation becomes an object of wonder whose beauty is beyond mortal

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<sup>77</sup> Following boyd and Ellison, "Social Network Sites," 225., I use 'Friend' (capitalized) to refer to the virtual relation between individual profiles on Facebook, as opposed to the colloquial, offline term 'friend'

<sup>78</sup>boyd, "Friends, Friendsters, and Top 8."

<sup>79</sup>Wiedemann, "Facebook: Das Assessment-Center Der Alltäglichen Lebensführung. [Facebook: The Assessment-Center of everyday lifestyle]"

comprehension ("whoever makes a bit of time and discovers our page, and what it offers, will understand that you would not have the physical time even in 10 lifetimes to discover the true beauty of Romania").<sup>80</sup> The discovery of this national beauty, supposed to be facilitated by this website, would transform the life of any Romanian who does so ("Romania will stay like a seal on your Romanian heart")<sup>81</sup> and encourage true patriotic activity: "You will wish to be a soldier in its army to defend her [Romania], you will wish to be an ambassador wherever you go so that foreigners will start to see her differently, you will wish that you will be a change yourself in a system that gives us headaches today."<sup>82</sup>

Getting past the cliché pathos of the overtly nationalist rhetoric, it is interesting to note that a webpage that is explicitly about photography and tourism finds its *raison d'être* in nationalism, thus politicizing the object of its activity without getting involved in partisan politics. The encouragement to 'change the system' explicitly positions this virtual community in a counter-discourse, but in a very vague way, a position which enables users to project their own dissatisfaction onto the website, hence maximizing its potential audience, for any specific counter-position would inevitably cause disagreements and alienate sections of the (potential) audience. The appeal to nationality and change in this very vague and cliché way can be interpreted as strategy of appeal to the lowest common denominator: whatever disagreements may arise about what 'change' should mean, most of the audience takes for granted the existence and legitimacy of the Romanian nation-state (national minorities will be discussed in a separate chapter), which acts a container for interaction.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup>"Cine își face puțin timp și descoperă pagina noastră, cu ce oferă ea, va înțelege că nu există timp fizic nici pentru 10 vieți pentru a descoperi Romania cu adevărata ei frumusețe." In Săvuică, Interviu Magda Savuica pentru Student Times.

<sup>81</sup>"România rămâne ca un sigiliu pe inima ta de român." In Ibid.

<sup>82</sup>"Îți vei dori să fii soldat în armata ei pentru a o apăra, îți vei dori să fii ambasador oriunde vei merge pentru ca străinii să înceapă să o vadă altfel, îți vei dori să fii tu însuși o schimbare într-un sistem care astăzi ne dă bătăi de cap." In Ibid.

<sup>83</sup>Wimmer and Glick Schiller, "Methodological Nationalism and beyond."

Asked about the effect the 273 project had that far on "the way people think about Romania," the author mentions the many messages she received from people "who would have never imagined that Romania is so beautiful and that she has so much to offer." This phrase implies that the embodiment of the nation lies in the representations of geographic space the website offers and it is making a competitive claim about the nation. The implication of an offer of beauty that is to be enjoyed by the viewer commodifies national identity and reifies landscape. The reader of this interview, who is supposedly also a member-user of the community, is interpellated as a consumer who is given a choice between countries, a subject position that would be familiar to a labor migrant or, more pertinently, a tourist. The competitive claim put forward by the interviewee here is that the aesthetic quality of the Romanian landscape is a compelling reason enough to choose Romania over other destinations. This consumerist discourse based on the commodification of national identity which is then sold on a global marketplace is articulated cogently by the interviewee as part of the answer to the same question: "My greatest joy came from those persons who decided to go on holiday in Romania rather than abroad." The same logic of nation-branding as described by Nadia Kaneva<sup>84</sup> is present here as well, but this time in a non-state, non-official setting. It is clear by now that 273 is consciously trying to establish a nation-brand, but the exact ways in which the resulting brand is similar and dissimilar to the 'national identity lite'<sup>85</sup> enacted by state nation-branding campaigns, i.e. constraining the national imaginary within a de-politicized and ahistorical frame, will be examined in the conclusions after the full analysis of the content. On first impression, the de-politicizing and de-historicizing strategy is present as well, but what is more interesting is that, as will be shown later, member-users of the community re-politicize and re-historicize national identity through their debates in the comments section.

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<sup>84</sup>Kaneva, *Branding Post-Communist Nations*.

<sup>85</sup>Kaneva and Popescu, "National Identity Lite Nation Branding in Post-Communist Romania and Bulgaria."



One last part of these interviews needs to be analyzed in detail, related to the theme of migration. The interviewer asks "What do you wish to say to those who have decided to leave the country for good, but still have not left?" The answer of the community manager balances two interpretative repertoires related to migration: one is emigration as an understandable, pragmatic, economic decision (or even necessity) and the other one is emigration as 'abandonment of country,' with a negative emotional and ethical dimension. The two conflicting interpretations are resolved by acknowledging emigration as an understandable economic necessity, whose problematic identitarian aspects are resolved by the dream that

"[I just wish that] one day we will have the jobs so that the talented ones will be truly appreciated for their true value and that they will return back to the country, I wish that us Romanians will create a system of self-sustenance and that we will turn us from guests in this big world to the hosts we once were. May God be on our side!" <sup>86</sup>

The religious overtone at the end fits into the religious nationalism theme mentioned earlier, which will be explained at length in a subsequent chapter. What is more interesting is the use of the national myth of hospitality, which is combined with the myth of the golden age ("the hosts we once were"). Emigration is seen as a necessary evil that erodes a supposed national characteristic, that of hospitality, which is implied by the touristic frame and plays an important role in the construction of the nation-brand. There is clearly a tension between the (often bleak) reality of emigration and the romanticized portrayal of the nation in the website. I will examine the way this tension is resolved by the community manager, on the one hand, and the member-users, on the other hand, in the last chapter.

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<sup>86</sup> "Îmi doresc doar ca într-o zi, să avem locuri de muncă, astfel încât cei talentați să fie cu adevărat apreciați la adevărata lor valoare, și aceștia să revină în țară, îmi doresc ca noi românii să ne creăm un sistem de autosusținere, și din musafiri în lumea asta mare, să redevenim gazdele de altă dată. **Doamne ajută!**" In Săvuică, Interviu Magda Savuica pentru Student Times.

## 5. Talk about the nation

### 5.1 The 2013 National Day album

The national day is the obvious occasion for national identity to be performed, nationalisms of all sorts to be publicly enunciated and one the few occasions when people talk explicitly about the nation, not just with the nation.

For the 1st of December 2013, Romania's national day, an album of 50 photographs collected from the users was assembled by the webmaster, along with other related posts on the wall of the page. The photos featured in this album<sup>87</sup> can be categorized as such: a) a public building, monument, or square, usually with a flag present, a panorama of a village or monastery (15), b) military personnel marching in the parades (9), c) the users holding a flag in various settings (The Pyramids of Egypt, the Eiffel Tower, a mountain plateau, on top of a building, in a park, even in a lightweight aircraft) (15), d) children holding flags or in folk costume (6), e) photographs of landscapes with no buildings or characters or just photos of flags(5).

The caption of the photograph included only the location where it was taken (if available) and the name of the author, except for one particular post, which shall be discussed in detail later. As one would expect, most of the comments were a variation on “Happy Holidays, Romania/Romanians!” or “God bless Romania!” along with the usual exclamations of admiration for the portrayed landscape. The diaspora made its presence felt via some émigrés who indicated from where they were transmitting their salutations (Denmark, Greece, and Germany). However, it was not emigration or nostalgia that was the main theme discussed by the community with this occasion. The theme that was discussed the most was a more abstract question of ‘the state of the nation.’ One short exchange of comments summarizes the general atmosphere: one user asks the following rhetorical question on a photo of Revolution Square

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<sup>87</sup><https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.675594925814655.1073741844.142699105770909&type=3> [1.06. 2014]

in Bucharest, which features a statue of King Carl I along with the monument commemorating the 1989 revolution: “Would our forefathers be proud of us and what we have done with the little country for which they gave their lives?”<sup>88</sup> to which two other users simply reply “No” and a third “definitely not, and we are not proud of what we are doing either☺”<sup>89</sup>

## 5.2 "We defeated ourselves"

One post in particular gathered a lot of attention and sparked a lengthy discussion.<sup>90</sup> The photograph was that of a Romanian flag flying in the wind, shot from directly underneath with the sun behind the flag, against a blue sky (see Illustration 1). A rather generic photo for the occasion that glorifies the nation via its most obvious symbol, whose photographic composition is made to inspire awe. Accompanying this photograph was a long quote from a blog post by the president of a Christian youth foundation.<sup>91</sup> The quote starts "[N]obody defeated us, ever. We defeated ourselves." The text then lists a number of national symbols, historical figures, politicians old and new. Among the negative aspects is the disparity between the great influx of new Orthodox Church buildings, often built with government subsidies and general public morals: "Then we have 200 churches in Bucharest. The churchiest capital in Europe. Watch your pockets when you get out of the train." The thread that links all these signs is the juxtaposition between a 'glorious past' and a 'decadent' present. The text then applauds a medieval king, a late 19th and early 20th century politician and two dissidents from the communist period for their moral integrity. A message is then sent to two categories of people, which is worth quoting at length:

<sup>88</sup>*Oare inaintasiinostriar fi mandri de noisi de ce am facutnoi cu tarisoarapt care si-au dateiviata?*

<sup>89</sup>*cu siguranta nu, sinicinoi nu suntemmandrii de ceeacefacem*

<sup>90</sup><https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=674889085885239&set=a.675594925814655.1073741844.142699105770909&type=3&theater> [1.06.2014]

<sup>91</sup><http://www.ciresarii.ro/index.php/la-multi-ani-romania-vladimir-pustan/> [1.06.2014]

"We have people that still dream, that still create, that still fight. To them "Happy Holiday Romania!" To the other ones, I wish them to end up where Goga [interwar prime-minister] wanted to send the Jews of the country. To Madagascar. We have connections there already. Radu Mazare [current mayor of the port-city of Constanta] has a piece of land there, two palm trees and a magician. Go there with your *manele* [mixture of folk and pop music associated with the working class and the Roma] and everything..."

This text constructs a world structured dichotomously into good and bad. The good and bad dichotomy is aligned with the past and present divide. All the positively-qualified signs make reference to the past, or rather to national history, while all the negatively-qualified elements are considered part of the present. Hence the two nodal points can be named 'glorious past' and 'decadent present'. The elements that are marked negatively are the possession of 'national' historical artifacts by 'foreign hand',<sup>92</sup> "a President shot on Christmas, some 25 million abortions, 25 liters of alcohol per capita", a few contemporary leading politicians and celebrities, "the communists" and the communist secret police, the *Securitate*, and a genre of music (*manele*) widely looked down upon for its association with the Roma. The positively marked elements are the historical figures around which national myths are constructed, conservative politicians and anti-communist dissidents.

A mainly elitist world-view, characterized by reverence of mythical national figures and a disdain for popular culture, represented here by the names of a few celebrities and a type of music, is mixed in with anti-Semitism and racism. While the anti-Semitism is more or less obvious (Goga's cabinet enacted anti-Semitic legislation), the racism is more indirect and needs some clarification. Firstly, Madagascar is dismissingly used in an orientalist fashion as a faraway no-man's land where to send 'undesirables', of which Jews are named explicitly. Secondly, and for the Romanian audience more obvious and important, the derisive attitude towards *manele* in present public discourse cannot be separated from racist attitudes towards the Roma.

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<sup>92</sup>"Stephen's sword is with the Turkish, the national treasure is in Moscow, the wealth of the Church is in Mount Athos and intellectuals in America"

The classism, racism and anti-Semitism is bounded with religious sentiment (unsurprising for the leader of a Christian foundation), most strongly felt in the text's recurrent motif of saints, which is used both in reference to national historiography ("Do we have saints? No. Maybe Brâncoveanu. The other ones we imported, and the ones made now at the call of boots are hilarious") and to court 'the average man' in a populist way ("We have thousands of Romanian saints. Some dead, some alive, living on 600 lei.").

Of the 43 comments to this post, 15 of them expressed explicit agreement with the pessimistic conclusions of the quoted text ("true", "true and painful", "a sad reality" etc.). Another 9 were just patriotic outbursts of the type "Happy Holidays, Romania(ns)!" The rest of the comments expanded on the themes present in the quoted text or problematized (with partial agreement or disagreement) issues from it.

The most popular comment, with 21 'likes', was a call to participate in an anti-government rally on National Day at the Triumphal Arch in Bucharest, the site of the military procession marking the day. The commentator prefaced the invitation with the following phrase "All of those who get angry reading the above we await you to express loudly your 'love' for those who brought this beautiful country to its present state."<sup>93</sup> This is clear example of how users are re-politicizing the webpage, sometime even to explicit political actions such as protests.

The link between the discursive and non-discursive sides of social movements is implicit in the quote above, but made explicit by other commentators. One applauded the text as a form of social action ("Bravooo! you who wrote these lines. You can count yourself amongst Romania's fighters. Just through the simple fact that you see things as they really are and that

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<sup>93</sup>*Petitei care se infuriaza citind cele de mai sus va asteptam sa va exprimati cu voce tare "dragostea" fata de cei care au adus aceasta frumoasa tara in starea in care este.*

you have the courage to express yourself"<sup>94</sup>). This was followed by a reply bringing to attention the need for 'action' as well as 'words':

"True. But words are not enough. Where is the action? There are some braving the cold today fighting for us all. The rest of you? We talk, if we invite you to go out on the street you don't hear and you don't see anything. But it's good that we're talking, it's still something..."<sup>95</sup>

Other commentators minimized the pessimistic tone of the text by using a strategy of relativisation by using a comparative argumentation scheme: "take any country in the world you want and you can make a list of everyday bad things in 5 minutes, if you know their history and their habits [...]"<sup>96</sup>

The same strategy of relativisation through comparison was used by another commentator as well, but this time combined with a strategy of self-victimization by scapegoating, positioning 'Romania' as a victim within an anti-colonialist narrative of the world:

"[...] All governments are corrupt, not just Romania's. Our bad luck is that we were not a rapacious people like England, Holland, France etc./these countries - England, France, Holland etc. (those who won't let us join the Schengen space) were and will remain the thieves of the planet. And where there are thieves, there have to be victims too."<sup>97</sup>

Another commentator had a more optimistic view of the present in light of a version of history where the existence of 'Romania' began 2000 years ago: "I say we should take advantage of what we have...health, a loved one next to us and the fresh air of as many more springs as possible! And the country is truly free after 1800 years, our time has come. Happy Holidays!" The same user justified a patriotic outburst of the type "God bless Romania!" because "[...] nobody loves their country because it is great, but because it is theirs!"<sup>98</sup>The

<sup>94</sup>Bravoooo! , tie care aiscrișacsterânduri .Te poti număra si tu printre luptători României. Numai prin simplul fapt că vezi lucrurile așa cum sunt și, ai curajul să te exprimi

<sup>95</sup>Adevarat. Dar vorbele nu sunt de ajuns. Unde este acțiunea? Sunt unii care îndura frigul luptând astăzi pentru noi toți. Restul? Vorbim, dacă va invităm să ieșiți în stradă nu auziți și nu vedeți nimic. Tot e bine că vorbim, tot e ceva ...

<sup>96</sup>iei la alegere orice țară din lume și faci o listă de mizerii cotidiene în 5 minute, dacă le știi istoria și le cunoști obiceiurile [...]

<sup>97</sup>[...] Guvernele toate sunt corupte, nu doar cel al României. Ghinionul nostru (soarta) e că nu am fost un popor acaparator ca și Anglia, Olanda, Franța, etc.

<sup>98</sup>Ma alătur și eu, pentru că nimeni nu-și iubeste țara fiindcă e mare, ci fiindcă este a sa!

view that Romanian history begins 2000 years ago is a basic part of nationalist mythology<sup>99</sup> and is taught in all school history manuals, so it is not surprising that such a statement would find its way here. The optimism here is based not on counterbalancing the negative aspects of reality highlighted in the post with some positive developments, but in a naïve vision of nationhood a la longue durée and in a blind allegiance to the nation.

A few other users offered their musings on the church-state-public morals nexus thematized in the post. One user remarked that "where there is a lot of poverty there is a lot of faith"<sup>100</sup> while another wrote a sort of prayer for the nation, in which corruption is seen as an absence of Christian morals in a deeply conservative way, mixed in with nationalism as a concern for the general welfare: "God please redeem the one who enters politics with clean hands and walks out with dirty hands for woe awaits the one who steals. God bless Romania her and redeem her"<sup>101</sup>

Other users, on the other hand, simply vented out their dissatisfaction with everyday hardship in a sarcastic way: "Happy Holidays! :))) new taxes, new levies and crap salaries fines may you live well if you can stay alive"<sup>102</sup> while another, also making use of sarcasm, made a short critique of the text: "No one ever defeated us? :)... let's get back to reality...."<sup>103</sup>

### 5.3 Duty towards the nation

Another post from the 1<sup>st</sup> December 2013 attracted a lot of attention (39 comments). It was one of the very rare posts which do not have a photograph, but it is simply a text. This time it was a text submitted by a user in which they reflect on the question "What have you done for Romania in 2013?" which serves as the title of the post. The author adopts a scolding tone

<sup>99</sup> see Boia, *Două Secole de Mitologie Națională* [Two centuries of national mythology]).

<sup>100</sup> unde ai multa saracie ai multa credinta

<sup>101</sup> Doamne te rog sa il mantuiesti pe cel care intra in politica cu mainile curate si iese cu mainile murdare pentru ca vai de ila ce fura. Binecuvinteaza Doamne Romania si mantuieste-o

<sup>102</sup> La multi anii :))) noi taxe noi.impozite si salarii de mizerie amenzii si sa traiti bine dacacmai putetii trai

<sup>103</sup> Nu ne-a batut nimeni niciodata? :)...sarevenim in realitate...

towards those that answer the question with another question, 'But what has Romania done for me?'" and towards those who considers paying their taxes as sufficient contribution. The grievance put forward in the text is that no difference is made between "taxes, governors, politicians and our essence as a people."<sup>104</sup> The text then proceeds in the first person singular, being written from a subjective perspective. The relationship between the textual ego and 'Romania' is described as one in which the ego is indebted to the nation for a long list of offerings: life, parents, grandparents and people; "forefathers and martyr heroes"; "the Fortress of the 33 Voivodes, splendid landscapes, nature or mountains"; "churches, priests, oases of tranquility, [...] trials, noise and chaos"; "professors, artists and values to hang on to"; "[...] a lot of stairs to climb and a lot of questions for which I seek answers every day." After declaring his doubt about whether he could ever repay 'Romania', the text concludes: "...and I think this is the most important thing I did for Romania in 2013: I loved her!"<sup>105</sup>

The relation between the individual and the imagined community is constructed here metaphorically via a constructive strategy of personification. The nation is essentialized and portrayed as one person with paternalistic functions towards the individual. This strategy simplifies the relation between the individual and society and augments the appeal to emotion by giving a more concrete form to the abstract concept of the nation to which, according to the text, the individual owes a moral debt. This debt supposedly originates from the god-like qualities attributed to the nation: it gives life to the individual, it provides him with ancestry, with values, in short, with an identity.

This metaphysical exaltation of the nation has the potentiality to enter into conflict with the discourse constructed by the webmaster as was presented in the first chapter of the analysis. In there, the nation is ordained by a god-figure, but ultimately subordinated to it, without

<sup>104</sup> *Pesemneacănu se face diferență din taxe, impozite, guvernanți, politicieni și esența noastră ca popor.*

<sup>105</sup> *...și cred că asta am făcut cel mai important pentru România în 2013: am iubit-o!*



being granted metaphysical powers, such as creating life. This contradiction was made explicit by three commentators to this post, one of which summarized the position cogently: "It is not Romania who gave you life, parents and grandparents. All these are from God!"<sup>106</sup> Another commentator was much more verbose in their refutation of the post: "All that you listed as being offered to you by Romania I can summarize in one word: tiredness. Or in other words: a wild geese chase. You have personified Romania and that sidelines things of real value."<sup>107</sup> The 'things of real value' named by this commentator is following Christ. Such a reaction to the implied transgression of the God-nation hierarchy by a religious Christian follower is to be expected, however this user, in the five comments they made to this post, refutes not only the attribution of god-like qualities to the nation, but also the national church because of its closeness to politics, which they feel corrupted the church, and the intertwining between religion and nationalism more generally ("They [politicians] corrupted even poor Paraschieva."<sup>108</sup> She should be excommunicated, so that she doesn't sully the holy site.")<sup>109</sup> This is one the few examples of (at least partial) refusal of the nationalist rhetoric I have encountered on the website. In this instance, the subject position of the 'Romanian national', with its implied allegiance to a state church, is rejected from a counter-position of the 'devout Christian', for whom the national identity proposed by the website carries with it the mixing in of politics with religion via nationalism,<sup>110</sup> which violates the sanctity of the church.

The attribution of life-giving to the nation proved to not be the only part of the text that was controversial. Another argument which proved to be contentious for some users is the claim

<sup>106</sup> *Nu v a dat Romania viata, parinti si bunici. Toate astea sunt de la Dumnezeu!*

<sup>107</sup> *Cele insirate de dvs ca fiindu-va oferite de Romania le pot rezuma intr-un singur cuvant, mai ales dupa felul cum le-ati ales si anume: oboseala. Altfel spus: goana dupa vant. Ati personificat Romania si asta poate pune in umbra lucruri cu adevarata valoare.*

<sup>108</sup> Saint Paraschieva, a saint in the Romanian Orthodox Church with a nation-wide relic worshipping movement.

<sup>109</sup> *Ori au corupt-o si pe biata Paraschieva. Sa o excomunic, sa nu mai spurce sf. locas.*

<sup>110</sup> For more on the topic of the relation between religion and national identity and between church and state in Romania see Stan and Turcescu, *Religion and Politics in Post-Communist Romania*. and Flora and Szilagyi, "Church, Identity, Politics: Ecclesiastical Functions and Expectation towards Churches in Post-1989 Romania."

in the first part of the text that 'paying taxes is not enough.' One user counter-argued both these claims with one of the few instances of the use of a non-essentialist repertoire of national identity that I have encountered in this virtual space:

"In my humble opinion, those who pay taxes and are engaged in civilized, civic way of life are doing more for Romania than all those who sing to it praise and love songs. Is really Romania the one who gives life, parents, grandparents etc? Romania is around 100 years old. Who gave life before that, dear Author? Probably Moldavia, Wallachia and Ada [sic] and so forth. And people were the ones who loved and lived as people back then too. Romania is a political unit and as every human reality it is in continuous change. As is the people who, by the way, is only calling itself "Romanian" for 150 years now. [...] So what is our duty towards Romania? Like the duty of any people towards the territorial-political unit in which it lives: to pay taxes for the good functioning of public things and to be engaged in a civic/ politically upright way of life. not [sic] to confuse it with God (by the way, from what I knew or believed, it is the Good Lord who gave us life)."<sup>111</sup>

The user here de-constructs the personified 'Romania' of the post by revealing the political and historically contingent and constantly changing nature of 'Romania' and counters the pathos of the text with a somewhat sarcastic formal, polite tone. However, this deconstruction has its limits. The idea of a duty towards the nation that every individual has is not rejected - the user is simply defending the position that 'paying taxes' is sufficient, to which "civilized, civic way of life" is added. What is meant by this, however, is not explicated. Moreover, the attribution of metaphysical powers to the nation is rejected on the same basis as the other user above - the hierarchy of God with a subordinated nation is maintained.

Most other users expressed their agreement with the post in a succinct manner ("very nice", "well said!" etc.) and some were emphatically nationalistic ("if even today you don't feel Romanian then go to hell...over there there is no nationalism it's you and the others....a frigid

<sup>111</sup>*După părerea mea umila, cei care plătesc taxe si impozite si se angajează într-un trai civic civilizat fac mai mult pentru România decât toți care-i cânta laude si mine de dragoste. Chiar e România cea care oferă viața, părinți, bunici etc? România are în jur de 100 de ani. Cine dădea viața înainte, draga domnule Autor? Probabil Moldova, Muntenia si Ada mai departe. Si oamenii iubeau si atunci și trăiau ca oameni. România e o unitate politica si ca orice realitate umană e în continua schimbare. Ca si poporul, de altfel, care numai de 150 de ani încoace își zice "românesc". [...] Si care e datoria noastră fata de România? Ca orice datorie a unui popor fata de unitatea teritorial-politica în care locuiește: sa plătească taxe pentru bunul mers al lucrurilor publice si sa se angajeze într-un trai civic/Politic vertical. nu S-o confunde cu Dumnezeu (a propoz, fin câte știam sau credeam eu, bunul Dumnezeu ne-a dat viața).*

Europe")<sup>112</sup> and subscribed to the idea of personal sacrifice for the nation ("we should give our life for her not her for ours. we are unworthy of her").<sup>113</sup> Other users, however, expressed partial agreement with the post in a 'yes-but' argumentation scheme, in which they first expressed their pride in being Romanian or initial agreement, followed by a remark of how hard life is in Romania ("It's true, but it is also true that it is also our people who made some of us lose our pride in saying that we are Romanian";<sup>114</sup> "A valid point. However. Romania gave me a medical system that almost killed my child"<sup>115</sup>; "we all love our country, but from so much poverty you just want to curse it"<sup>116</sup>). A dynamic formed where some users would point out to a negative reality that they felt nullified any duty they might have had towards the nation and one user in particular would reply to them not by disagreeing on the nature of the problem, but by insisting that the problem lies not in a personified Romania, but with its inhabitants ("it is not the country that deserves to be cursed, for she is not the poor one...she may be poor in people who know how to take advantage of her wealth")<sup>117</sup> and on the need to focus on positive aspects despite the negatives ("This denigration [of the country] is the worst poverty...when we spend more time cursing rather than bringing out the good and the beautiful...")<sup>118</sup>

Émigrés also made their presence felt in two instances, both of which expressed longing for 'the country', but only one is more detailed than that: "I am proud that I'm Romanian simply because I was born this way. I cried when I saw a little girl dressed in folk costume at the

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<sup>112</sup>*Si daca azi va simtiti neromani duceti-va la dracu....acolo nu exista nationalism sunteti voi si cu ceilalti...o Europa frigida*

<sup>113</sup>*noi tb sa ne dam viata pentru ea nu ea pt noi.suntem nedemni pt ea.*

<sup>114</sup>*tot ai noştri ne-au făcut pe unii sa ne pierdem mândria de a spune ca suntem români.*

<sup>115</sup>*Romania mi-a dat un sistem medical care aproape mi-a ucis copilul*

<sup>116</sup>*toti ne iubim tara, dar de la atata saracie iti mai vine sa o si hulesti*

<sup>117</sup>*Nu tara merita hulita, ca nu ea e cea saraca...da poate e saraca in oameni care sa stie sa puna in valoare bogatia ei.*

<sup>118</sup>*Hula asta e cea mai mare saracie... cand stam pe hulit in loc sa scoatem la lumina frumosul si binele...*

church today, in Montreal, I miss my country but I am not ashamed that I left."<sup>119</sup> The position of émigré is in opposition to the 'duty towards the nation' that is the main theme of the post, who despite being aware of this may still find that having the acceptance of fellow nationals is still important to them. Hence this post can be interpreted as resolving this ideological dilemma by hedging the main sentence "I am not ashamed that I left", which defends the speaker's right to emigrate and still be part of the national community, with proof of belonging to the nation ("I was born this way") and the commitment (expressed through crying) to the community, represented through widely-accepted symbols (church, folk costume).

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<sup>119</sup> *Eu sunt mandra ca sunt româncă pur si simplu pentru ca asa m am născut. Am plâns azi când am văzut o fetiță îmbrăcată în straie naționale la biserica, in Montreal, mi-e dor de tara mea dar nu mi-e rușine ca am plecat.*

## **6. Dealing the heterogeneity, manufacturing homogeneity**

### **6.1 Introduction**

As was made evident previously, the discourse of national identity promoted within 273 has a distinct religious or spiritual tendency, coupled with a nostalgia for a golden age defined by tradition, which implies a reverence to ancestry. This much is explicit within the text, but what is more telling is the silence of the text. Diversity, be it human, cultural or geographical is strangely absent from the content posted on the website. Mountainous landscapes are by far the most common sight, urban or cultural monuments are very rare and usually related to Romanian national history, while human characters appear rarely in photographs and usually in the shape of children or elderly in folk costume in stereotypical poses. No mention is made of the ethnic diversity that those landscapes contain, no reference is made to the existence of minorities of any kind. It is not that the material making up the website expresses hostility to non-Romanians, it simply does not acknowledge the existence of anything non-Romanian, in a strict, nationalistic, ethnic sense. Subtly, through silence, the idea of a homogenous, ethnic nation is reinforced. While definitely not the poster of exclusivist, intolerant nationalism, because there is no room is made for difference, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, political or even regional, there is still a built-in tendency for intolerance and xenophobia.

This background tendency occasionally comes into conflict with the infrastructure in which the virtual community exists. Even though it is technically just a software, Facebook does carry its own biases and imposes discursive limitations. Its make-up and the logic behind it is based on a neoliberal idea of personal branding, and part of that neoliberal baggage is political correctness - Facebook does not allow hate-speech to be uttered within itself and encourages users to report such instances. 273 has to conform to these conditions and the official policy

of the community explicitly forbids 'racist comments'.<sup>120</sup> This does not, however, prevent such comments from appearing.

In the few instances when the pattern is broken and a 'foreign' element is introduced in a photograph, there is always a racist and xenophobic reaction from some users, though, fortunately, they are (judging from the number of comments) a minority, whereas most users appreciate the break with homogeneity, though that is not entirely unproblematic either, as I shall illustrate below.

On the 14th February 2014, as part of the Dragobete celebrations (a supposedly folk tradition celebrating of love and fertility taking place at the end of February, now marketed as a national alternative to Valentine's day), users were asked to submit a photo of themselves and their romantic partner in a Romanian setting. One photo from the album stands out:<sup>121</sup> against a backdrop of the Peleş Castle (former pre-communist royal residence), in the foreground are two hands side by side, one male and one female, each with a wedding ring on. The twist is that the male hand is dark-skinned and the female hand is fair-skinned (see Illustration 2).<sup>122</sup> While most of the feedback in the 25 comments was positive and a few explicitly endorsed the inter-racial element by using the 'love conquers all' repertoire ( "10 from the bottom of my heart for the "milk chocolate" of love <3"<sup>123</sup>; "true love is color-blind! 10 with my congratulations"),<sup>124</sup> three comments were explicitly racist and insulting and used a biological repertoire of cleanliness, illness and disgust (I will not reproduce the comments

<sup>120</sup><https://www.facebook.com/notes/273-de-locuri-pe-care-trebuie-s%C4%83-le-vezi-%C3%AEnainte-s%C4%83-pleci-din-rom%C3%A2nia/politica-273/228590027158629> [1.06.2014]

<sup>121</sup><https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=534268076614008&set=a.537725296268286.121114.142699105770909&type=3&theater> [1.06.2014]

<sup>122</sup><https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=534268076614008&set=a.537725296268286.121114.142699105770909&type=3&theater>

<sup>123</sup>10 din inima pentru "ciocolata cu lapte " a iubirii  
sa fie in ceas bun !

<sup>124</sup>dragostea sincera nu are culoare !! 10 cu felicitari!!

here). Despite the official ban on such comments, at the time of writing this thesis, three months after the comments were posted, they still were not deleted.

The vignette above illustrates the limits of the national identity lite<sup>125</sup> promoted by the website. It builds on and reproduces classic Romanian nationalism from the late communist period, but it has to reconcile it with the political correctness of Facebook and the sanitization necessary for a nation-brand. Exclusivist and xenophobic tendencies can be simply omitted in order to present an optimistic image, but without actively countering those tendencies, they will show up anytime the illusion of the pure nation is even remotely challenged. It is comforting that in the example above the positive overwhelmingly outnumbered the negative, but there is something problematic with making the only token to diversity using an ethnic category that is practically absent from the nationalist imaginary and public discourse overall in a country where dark skin-color has been used for centuries as an excuse to discriminate against and oppress the second biggest ethnic minority present on its territory. I therefore argue that this photograph, though well-intended, is an instance of racist othering and exoticization that is used to avoid confronting the immediate, structural discrimination against the Roma population. The juxtaposition between a 'black', African man and a 'white', Romanian woman proves acceptable because Africans are not present in public discourse, which means that this instance can be written off as a marginal, inconsequential phenomenon, or as an exotic curiosity, which despite good intentions, creates a categorical boundary. Thus, this photograph manages to pass by largely without controversy.

## 6.2 The Hungarians

Other examples of when ethnic diversity becomes acknowledged show that there is a general positive reception when users emphasize commonalities between ethnicities. For example,

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<sup>125</sup>Kaneva and Popescu, "National Identity Lite Nation Branding in Post-Communist Romania and Bulgaria."

this was the case of a on a Christmas Day post in 2013, which was fairly popular with 2423 likes and 493 shares.<sup>126</sup> The photograph was that of a small snow-covered village in the middle of a forest and the accompanying caption was a quote from the Bible (Isaiah 9) about the birth of Jesus Christ, explained as "Here is the true significance of the holiday". Besides this, there was also a greeting of "Merry Christmas, dear Romanians." Out of 24 comments, all of which were variations of "Merry Christmas", by far the most popular comment with 50 likes was one by a user with a Hungarian name which wrote, in Romanian, "Merry Christmas and not just for Romanians!"<sup>127</sup> accompanied by an image of a nativity scene painting. This comment was replied to by 5 other users with Christmas greetings, one of which was in Hungarian from a user with a Romanian name. This small gestures shows that, at least in certain conditions, breaking the ethnic monopoly of the website is possible without causing a negative reaction.

Another example of this type, this time with more overt inflammatory nationalism, can be found in a post about the newly restored Károlyi Castle in Carei/Nagykároly.<sup>128</sup> One user commented "This castle should be wiped off the face of the earth along with those of other 'grofs' who oppressed the Romanian people."<sup>129</sup> This displays the use the myth of oppression by foreign powers, in this example about Romanians in Transylvania being oppressed by Hungarians before 1918. Others expressed concern about the non-Romanian history of the monument as well, without going to outright nationalist, exclusivist lengths. One users asked "by us or by Hungarians?"<sup>130</sup>, thus implicitly questioning the legitimacy of the presence of this monument on the webpage, whereas another balanced exclusivist nationalism (the

<sup>126</sup><https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=688209611219853&set=a.191928127514673.45376.142699105770909&type=1&theater> [1.06.2014]

<sup>127</sup>*Craciun Fericit, si nu numai pentru romani !*

<sup>128</sup><https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=455781924462624&set=a.152782268095926.31230.142699105770909&type=1&theater> [1.06.2014]

<sup>129</sup>*acest castel trebuia ras de pe fata pamintului ca si celelelalte ale "grofilor" cei care au asuprit poporul roman*

<sup>130</sup>*De noi sau de unguri?*



disapproval of posting about a non-Romanian monument) with appreciation for historical monuments (approval of the fact that a historical building was restored): "finally a good thing!!! but Romanian castles?..."<sup>131</sup> Further disapproval from a nationalist perspective came about on the issue of language use in public "the translations in Romanian from around the castle were broken...I am speechless!!!"<sup>132</sup>

The inflammatory nature of the first comment quoted above did spark a reaction. Another user confronted it directly:

"according to your logic, we probably wouldn't be left with many buildings in this country, because a lot of these buildings were built by 'grofs'! I for one disagree, these buildings are of great value, if all historical buildings and monuments were to be renovated, it would be fantastic! Also, I don't think many Romanians know that his castle exists and if they saw this photo they probably would think that it's from another country!"<sup>133</sup>

The rebuttal of the first comment is done on the basis of reverence for the past, which does not confront the underlying logic of the comment it reacts to, which is exclusivist, vengeful nationalism. The first comment talks about how buildings of 'foreigners' which supposedly oppressed the speakers in-group should be destroyed, whereas the reply comment talks about how old buildings should be maintained because they are intrinsically valuable. The rebuttal consists in changing the discourse used, a change motivated through hyperbole in order to show the absurd consequences of the nationalist discourse. While this strategy may be effective rhetorically, it fails to tackle the xenophobia that underlies the first comment, hence letting it be reproduced silently. The rebuttal also increases its rhetorical effect by playing on the internalized stigma and positive stereotypes of the audience, i.e. that Romania is a backward country and that other countries are more civilized. This comment, with its implicit message of inter-ethnic harmony, proved to be more popular amongst other users judging by

<sup>131</sup> *insfarsit un lucru bun!!! dar castelele romanesti?...*

<sup>132</sup> *traducerile in limba romana din juru l Castelului erau rupte...fara cuvinte!!!*

<sup>133</sup> *Dupa logica ta, probabil ca n-am mairamane cu foarte multe cladiri in tara asta, caci sunt multe astfel de cladiri cladite de "grofi"! Eu unul nu sunt de acord, cladirile astea reprezinta o mare valoare, daca ar fi toate cladirile istorice si monumentele renovate, ar fi extraordinar! De altfel, cred ca multi romani nu stiu de existenta acestor castel iar daca ar vedea acest poza probabil ar crede ca-i in alt tara!*

the number of likes (six) than the original comment, which except for this reply and another one that ridiculed it the exclusivist tone ("Then you stay with the ruins at Sarmisegetuza and it will be fine...")<sup>134</sup> remained otherwise unobserved.

Other comments that promoted inter-ethnic harmony also proved to be more popular than the ones which drew on Romanian anti-Hungarian nationalism. One user commented in Hungarian "Beautiful! It did not happen overnight, it was not easy, but it finally happened! Not just the pride of Romania, but also the pride of Europe, a true gem!!!",<sup>135</sup> which earned four likes. Another comment that repeated the one in Hungarian and added in Romanian "Exactly what I wanted to say, but I couldn't find the words..."<sup>136</sup> earned two likes.

Very rarely, the website will feature posts that present a certain site, monument or building explicitly as Hungarian. In August 2013 a photograph was posted of a church interior where in the background were hanged the flags of Hungary and of the Szekler Land, along with other local flags.<sup>137</sup> The church in question was the Dârjiu/Székelyderzs Unitarian church, described in the caption as "one of the most representative fortified Szekler churches." This introductory line was followed by a short history of the building and the need for repairs, a mentioning of the fact that the Dârjiu/Székelyderzs church is "the only one that belongs to the Hungarian community" out of the seven fortified churches that are UNESCO heritage sites on in Romania, followed by directions to the village and a praise of the monument "[...] the beauty and the artistic and architectural value of the Dârjiu church deserves any effort and completely justifies UNESCO's involvement."<sup>138</sup> This description invokes the principle of ethnic ownership by qualifying the church as 'Szekler' and as 'belonging to the Hungarian

<sup>134</sup> *Atunci ramineti voi cu ruinele de la Sarmisegetuza si bine e...*

<sup>135</sup> *Csodás! Nem ment máról holnapra, nem volt könnyű, de végre megvan! Nem csak Romániának, de Európának is büszkesége, ékessége!!!*

<sup>136</sup> *Exact astavroiamsa spun sieu, dar nu gaseamcuvintele...*

<sup>137</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=613731492000999&set=a.191928127514673.45376.142699105770909&type=1&theater> [1.06.2014]

<sup>138</sup> *frumusețea și valoarea artistică și arhitecturală a bisericii de la Dârjiu merită orice efort și justifică pe deplin demersul celor de la UNESCO*

community’, thus making the presence of Hungarian heritage visible on the website, but in doing so also reinforcing a boundary between ‘Hungarian’ and ‘Romanian.’ The use of the qualifier ‘on the territory of Romania’ rather than the adjective Romanian which is usually used in describing monuments further reinforces this boundary. However, the post is deeply sympathetic and encourages helping the repair works because the building in question is framed as a monument valuable in of itself, with the Hungarian character attributed to it being incidental and non-problematic.

One user, however, did find this interpretation problematic and used the principle of ethnic ownership present in the description to make a short anti-Hungarian quip: “well if it belongs to the Hungarians then they should take care of repairing it.”<sup>139</sup> The Hungarian character attributed to the building now overrides its status as a monument and warrants its excision from the implied Romanian community of the website, thus questioning its presence. If the ethnic boundary was only implicit in the description, it is made explicit in this comment. Three users responded to this comment in three different ways, displaying a variety of interpretative repertoires and subject positions: simply calling out its maliciousness (“Oh you’re so mean!!! ☹”) <sup>140</sup> which counters the exclusionary nationalism with an ethical judgment, assuming the subject position of ‘Hungarian,’ of the boundary and ethnic ownership in a confrontational manner (“We will repair it if need be [...]”) <sup>141</sup> and by invoking Christianity as a common ground that overrides national belonging (“ “God” does not see what nationality the church is...I think we all have one God!!!”) <sup>142</sup>

Sometimes it is not even necessary to explicitly make the presence of other ethnicities visible in order to get a nationalist reaction, a fleeting remark will do just as well. In a post that urges

<sup>139</sup> *paidacaapartinemaghiarilorsaibagrijasa o repara !*

<sup>140</sup> *Vaicerautacioasaesti!! ☹*

<sup>141</sup> *O vomreparadacava fi nevoie [...]!!!*

<sup>142</sup> *[...] "Dumnezeu" nu se uita la cernationalitate are biserica....eu cred caavem un singurDumnezeutot!!!*

users to spread the word about and visit the medieval town of Sighișoara/Schäßburg/Segesvár, the description of the photograph (people passing on the street in the old town) included in its short history of the settlement the phrase “founded in the XII century by Saxons brought to the area by Hungarian kings.” The most popular comment out of a total of 54, with 17 likes, challenged this assertion in a fashion typical of Romanian nationalism: “Sighisoara was not founded by Saxons. The area was inhabited since the bronze age [sic]... there was a Dacian citadel there, the Romanians had a citadel there long before the Saxons came. But most buildings and objects were kept from the Saxons. They were amongst the last to arrive and consolidated the city in its present form.”<sup>143</sup>

This comment uses the interpretative repertoire of ‘Dacomania’, something which one user called it out on. The Dacians in Romanian historiography are considered an ancient population that inhabited the present-day territory of Romania as direct ancestors of today’s Romanian population, thus making ‘Dacian’ synonymous with ‘Romanian.’ The term ‘Dacomania’ refers to the use of the myth of the Dacians not just as an argument that ‘Romanians’ were historically the first population to occupy the present-day territory of Romania before ‘Hungarians’ or ‘Germans,’ but that all civilization started with the Dacians, thus putting the Romanian people in a privileged position amongst the world of nations.<sup>144</sup> While this comment does not make such extreme claims, the obsession with finding Dacian remains in more diverse areas of Romania, such as Sighișoara, and bluntly using Dacian and Romanian as synonyms is a hallmark of the ‘Dacomaniac’ discourse. Even though it was popular, no other user continued the theme or argued against it, with the rest of the comments being the usual blend of admiration and personal anecdotes.

<sup>143</sup>*Sighisoara nu a fost intemeiat de sasi. Zona a fost locuita inca din epoca bronzului... a fost cetate dacica acolo, romanii au avut cetate acolo mult inainte de venirea sasilor. Dar de la sasi s-au pastrat cele mai multe cladiri si obiecte. Au fost printre ultimii veniti si cei ce au consolidat cetatea in forma de azi.*

<sup>144</sup>For more on Dacomania see Boia, *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness*.

These are the more visible examples of discussion of Romanian-Hungarian relations that I could find in the sample. However, there is a more subtle sign of this aspect, namely the not-uncommon participation of users with Hungarian-sounding names in the predominant category of comments, that of short admiring remarks with a phatic function. This phenomenon suggests that the national identity aspect of the website is not so strong that it overwhelms its primary focus on photography and tourism, thus allowing non-Romanians to participate on an equal footing. However, the constant recurrence of more or less overtly nationalistic and occasionally anti-Hungarian comments means that the national identity frame is never far away. Considering the tone of the website as explained in the first chapter of the analysis, the presence of xenophobic talk is anything but surprising. What is interesting to note is that the counter-reaction that promotes inter-ethnic harmony, which is usually stronger, works by framing the discussion in a non-ethnic way.

These positive examples show that it by framing the discussion in non-ethnic terms the possibility for inter-ethnic dialogues is opened and a sort of cross-ethnic banal nationalism takes shape whereby Hungarian users can take pride in 'Romania', though not necessarily in 'being Romanian.' This is made possible by switching the order of boundaries from within the nation-state to outside the nation-state, thereby enabling a comparison between 'Romania' and other countries while avoiding comparisons between 'Romanians' and other nationalities. In this way both Romanian and Hungarian users can take pride in monuments or landscapes that supposedly attest to the greatness of the nation-state outside its borders without crossing into sensitive issues that might enable nationalist outpourings on both sides.

### **6.3 The Roma**

So far I have focused on the negotiation of the relation between the titular nation of the website and the largest minority of the nation-state, the Hungarian community. A look must

be given to the second largest minority, the Roma community, whose special situation and role in the Romanian national imaginary makes it far more interesting.

What is most peculiar about the Roma depicted on the 273 website is that they do not exist. I have not observed any photograph or post that mentions this social category or features any sign that might be associated with it. The only way in which the category of Roma is present on the website is in the figure of the ‘Gypsy’ which is occasionally, though not often, used in comments.

As I have shown above, Hungarian monuments are displayed on the webpage, albeit rarely, and through them the category of ‘Hungarian’ is legitimated as part of ‘Romania.’ This does not remain uncontested, but the reception seems to be generally positive. The category of ‘Roma’ is not given not even this superficial attention. The silence about the Roma makes sense only if one takes into account the connotations carried by ‘Roma’ and the brand image 273 wants to construct for itself and, by extension, for Romania.

First of all, ‘Roma’ is a recent introduction to the Romanian language, a result of the political correctness necessary for EU accession. The term used colloquially remains ‘Țigan’ (Gypsy), which is now considered an offensive term. The term ‘Roma’ remains controversial to this day as it is generally seen as an imposition by the EU that blurs the line between ‘Romanian’ and ‘Roma’ due to the phonetic similarity. The concern with this linguistic coincidence betrays a concern for the transgression of a symbolic boundary between ‘Romanian’ and ‘Gypsy.’<sup>145</sup> In contemporary Romanian anything associated with the ‘Gypsy’ becomes unclean and must be avoided. The ‘Gypsy’ belongs to the repertoire of pollution and corruption, in a physical, spiritual and social sense. The adjectives associated with the stereotype of the ‘Gypsy’ are ‘dirty’, ‘thieving’, ‘lazy’, ‘uncivilized.’

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<sup>145</sup> For more on the subject see Woodcock, “Romania and EUrope.”

These attributes are implied by the context and way in which ‘Gypsy’ is used by users of this website. For example, starting from a post about the inauguration of a new highway through the Bucegi mountains,<sup>146</sup> the most circulated tourist area in Romania, something which the webmaster disapproved of because of a fear that “the only “benefits” will be more barbecues and less wild animals in the area”<sup>147</sup>, the discussion turned from the relation between tourism and wild life preservation to the behavior of Romanian tourists when barbecuing and visiting wild natural areas, to the reasons why there are so few foreign tourists visiting Romania. One user expressed the following opinion: “maybe it’s because of the ill fame we have in the world because of the Gypsies that are going around Europe saying they are Romanian! Maybe they are Romanian, but if they don’t have birth certificates and identity cards who will believe them? Maybe this is the main reason why foreigners won’t come!”<sup>148</sup> The ‘we’ in this example is associated with ‘Romanian’, which is contrasted to ‘Gypsy’. The tension as expressed in the text lies in the association of ‘Gypsy’ and ‘Romanian’ outside the boundaries of Romania, which causes negative effects (ill fame and fewer tourists) on ‘Romania.’ This comment exemplifies the negative associations carried by the word ‘Gypsy’ and its opposition to ‘Romanian’ as it is used in this space.

Another example clarifies the linguistic realization of boundary maintenance further. In a fairly unremarkable post about the Corcoaiei Gorge,<sup>149</sup> the discussion in the comments turned, as in the post mentioned above, to the unsavory behavior of Romanian tourists of leaving trash behind them when they go through wild natural areas. A common phrase used frequently on the 273 website in a wide array of contexts and practically regarding any

<sup>146</sup><https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=621386597902155&set=a.191928127514673.45376.142699105770909&type=1&theater> [1.06.2014]

<sup>147</sup>*singurele "beneficii" vor fi mai multe grătareși mai puține animale sălbatice în zonă.*

<sup>148</sup>*poate din cauză numărului pe care îl avem în lume din cauză tiganilor care mustesc peste tot în Europa și spun că sunt români! Poate o fi români, dar dacă n-au certificate de naștere și buletine cine să-i creadă? Poate asta e cauza principală pe care străinii nu vin!*

<sup>149</sup><https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=613412578699557&set=a.191928127514673.45376.142699105770909&type=1&theater> [1.06.2014]

subject is “beautiful country, too bad it’s inhabited,” a phrase which is used to criticize the shortcomings of the Romanian people, however defined. This phrase dissociates landscape from any human element, reifying the nation into the landscape and excising from the nation the people, which are considered to have a corrupting effect on the landscape, hence not being worthy of the nation. This phrase was used in this post as well, something which sparked a debate between those who endorse its use and those who are against it by arguing that it is a useless form of lamentation that breeds pessimism when what is needed is optimism. This kind of debate arises frequently and in all types of post. One user in this particular example defended the use of the phrase by saying “[...] I used it to refer to what “peasants”, who are not necessarily from the countryside, to what “cocalarii”<sup>150</sup> who are not always Gypsies, are doing to these magnificent places.”<sup>151</sup>

The littering of wild preserve spaces and the sullyng of the landscape is attributed to “peasants”, a class denominator and “cocalari”, a derogatory status denominator, which encompasses ‘Gypsies.’ By restricting the use of the originally self-derogatory phrase to the ‘Gypsies’ and the ‘peasants’ it becomes simply derogatory towards those categories because it puts the blame of polluting the national landscape solely on them. This is a clear scapegoating strategy that constricts the boundary of the in-group in order to eliminate a perceived impure element, something that was observed to be a common de-stigmatization strategy amongst Romanian emigrants in other studies.<sup>152</sup> The Roma are missing from this website’s portrayal of Romanian because the term is invariably translated in vernacular language into ‘Gypsy’, something which carries a powerful connotation of impurity that clashes strongly with the overall quest for tradition and purity of the 273 brand.

<sup>150</sup> A word derived from the Romani language used to refer to a fan of the musical genre *manele*, in a narrow sense, or to an uncaught or otherwise exhibiting bad taste individual.

<sup>151</sup> *Dar am facut asta referindu-ma la ce fac "taranii", care nu sunt neaparat de la tara, la ce fac "cocalarii", care nu intotdeauna sunt tigani, cu aceste locuri mirifice.*

<sup>152</sup> see Morosanu and Fox, “No Smoke without Fire.”



## 7. Nostalgia, Archaism and Escapism

Nostalgia is certainly a defining trait of the brand, to some extent it can be said that 273 specializes in selling nostalgia. Nothing makes this clearer than the album 273 Romanian Nostalgias (273 Nostalgii Românești),<sup>153</sup> the longest running and most successful album of the website. It was started in December 2010, just three months after the website was created in August the same year, and photographs are still being added to it to this day, currently numbering 304 photographs. It is by far the most popular album, with over 8200 likes, 734 shares and 566 comments. Just scanning through the album one is immediately struck by the prevalence of two types of figures: old persons and young children, both usually dressed in folk costume (see Illustrations 3 for an example).

### 7.1 Nostalgia and Banal Nationalism

Childhood, nostalgia and the nation are not necessarily linked, but often enough one sees evidence of how those themes are related to each other via banal nationalism. For example, in a post from August 2013 which featured a photograph of the Recaș vineyards,<sup>154</sup> accompanied by a poem by George Coșbuc entitled “Vestitorii Primăverii” (The Messengers of Spring), one user commented: “Yes for a few moment I went back to childhood, when I felt the joy of their return...It was beautiful, I was a child, it was another Romania.”<sup>155</sup> The chain of equivalence childhood-joy-beauty-Romania is made obvious here. The remark here is about time and different phases of life, with ‘Romania’ acting as the container of those periods of time. It is not a remark about the nation, but nationalism functions as an interpretative filter to the extent that a national denomination functions as a temporal indicator. Because of the linking of the individual categorization of personal history to the reified community, the

<sup>153</sup><https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.172780232762796.37274.142699105770909&type=3> [1.06.2014]

<sup>154</sup><https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=611758882198260&set=a.191928127514673.45376.142699105770909&type=1&theater> [1.06.2014]

<sup>155</sup> *Da m-am intors pentru cateva momente la copilarie, atunci cand am trait bucuria reintoarcerii lor... A fost frumos, eram copil, era o alta Romania.*

romanticized memory of childhood on a personal level becomes a metaphor for myth of a golden age on a collective level.

Not all posts that explore the thematic nexus of childhood-grandparents-nostalgia elicit a romanticized reaction towards them. Occasionally one can encounter comments such as the following, which argue against idealizing rural living and the figure of the grandparent by using the repertoire of hardship, which transforms the beauty and naturalness of rural life into grueling hard labor and lack of opportunity: "how nice it is for us who live in warm houses with running water and many other things necessary for a decent living, whereas almost all the old people of the country live in these conditions. It's beautiful but it would be more beautiful if they had an alternative."<sup>156</sup> This shows how the reifying discourse that takes shape in this virtual space can be rejected by changing the subject position from that of a Romanian national, which is the one interpellated by the website, to that of an urban dweller.

The concepts of ancestors, home and nation are linked in the same way. In a comment made to the album, one user expressed their gratitude for the assembly of this album in a way shaped by the experience of migration: "thank you for giving me a bit of taste of home...I really miss my grandparents...my country!!!"<sup>157</sup> As in the previous example, 'country', the most common vernacular for nation, acts as the container for the precedent concepts. Through banal nationalism, very personal, individual experiences are connected to the imagined community superordinate to the individual because the nation is considered the 'obvious' frame of reference needed to understand one's experience of transborder mobility.

The concepts that pertain to the individual (childhood, home, ancestors) and those that pertain to the imagined community, namely the myth of the golden age, are linked through the

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<sup>156</sup>*Ce bine ne este noua cei care stam la caldura cu apa curenta in casa si multe alte lucruri pt un trai decent iar batranii tarii de la sate aproape toti traiesc in aceste conditii. E frumos dar mai frumos ar fi daca ar avea si o alternativa*

<sup>157</sup>*multumesc ca mi-ati adus un pic de parfum de acasa...mi-e tare dor de bunici mei...de tara mea!!!*

concept of ‘tradition’ and its associated signs. One post exemplifies this connection nicely.<sup>158</sup> The photograph is one of the few that capture a building’s interior, rather than the outdoors. It is a photograph of the ‘best’ room of a traditional rural house, where a young women’s dowry would be stored, consisting of hand-woven and hand-sewn carpets, blankets, pillows etc. all made by the women’s mother and grandmother (see Illustration 4). The caption of the post sets the tone in the direction of nostalgia and tradition by asking the question in a tense that suggests continuity with the past and by naming the main symbols: “Does anyone still have such a thing still? Room, dowry chest...”<sup>159</sup> The comments to this post are a mix between those that relate it to their personal experience (“I can almost smell grandma’s room with tens of blankets”<sup>160</sup>; “I was so happy when I visited my grandparents...unforgettable moments...I miss them”<sup>161</sup>) without mentioning collective identity aspects and those who interpret the post purely as a matter of national identity. The latter deplore the loss of traditional practices, such as the dowry chest, because national identity is conceived in an essentialist manner and that essence is synonymous with tradition. This way of thinking is clearly expressed by the comment “Sadly we are slowly losing our identity, we are forgetting traditions and we remain a disoriented people! It’s sad what’s happening to us, but that is that!”<sup>162</sup> Another comment had the message, but put the blame on modernization, symbolized by the shopping center (“I am sorry to say this, but the identity of the Romanian people, from this point of view is being lost in the shopping center”).<sup>163</sup>

<sup>158</sup><https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=625902667450548&set=a.191928127514673.45376.142699105770909&type=1&theater> [1.06.2014]

<sup>159</sup>*Mai are cineva oare? Cameră, ladă de zestre..*

<sup>160</sup>*Parca miros camera bunicii cu zeci de pături si plapume.*

<sup>161</sup>*ce fericit eram cand ma duceam la bunici...vremuri de neuitat...imi lipsesc*

<sup>162</sup>*Din pacate incetul cu incetul ne pierdem identitatea, uitam traditiile si ramanem un popor dezorientat! E trist ce se intampla cu noi dar asta e*

<sup>163</sup>*Imi pare rau sa spun ,dar identitatea poporului roman ,din pntul asta de vedere se pierde in centrul comercial*

## 7.2 Archaism

The essentialist linking of tradition with national identity leads logically to the construction of an imagined time when tradition and identity were pure. The concept of tradition, evaluated positively, links semantically to the concept of past, something which invites the dichotomy with the present, which, in order for tradition to be considered a positive concept, has to be negatively evaluated. The insistence on tradition as the locus of national essence invites the dichotomization of time into a glorious past and a decadent present. Thus tradition cannot be separated from the myth of the golden age. In the discourse constructed within the 273 space the golden age is not located in a specific historical era. Instead it is more of a place outside time, the golden age refers to an eternal ‘Romania’, of which the best symbol is the figure of the rural-residing, land-working, pious, kind, wise grandparents. Accordingly, the geographical space pertaining to this golden-age-in-an-eternal-past is the semi-wilderness of the mountain village, a landscape at once tamed, domestic and safe, yet natural, wild and imposing. Through these romanticized figures ‘Romania’ can be presented as a space where the past is still living, where traditions, morality and natural beauty are alive.

Balázs Trencsényi notes that in the interwar period Romanian intellectuals theorized national essence using a duality between benign archaism and negative primitivism.<sup>164</sup> This idea of an archaic-primitive duality was carried forth into the present day by a teleological hard understanding of nationhood, conserved in the discourse of the Ceaușescu regime,<sup>165</sup> which was then further perpetuated by the weak reform of historical teaching in public schools in the 1990s.<sup>166</sup> It is exactly this type of positive archaism that can be seen taking shape in the 273 space.

<sup>164</sup>Trencsényi, “The Conceptualization of National Character in the Romanian Intellectual Tradition.”

<sup>165</sup> see Petrescu, “Building the Nation, Instrumentalizing Nationalism.”

<sup>166</sup> see Pârâianu, “National Prejudices, Mass Media and History Textbooks: The Mitu Controversy.”

Archaism does not subtract itself from the logic of progress, it simply inverts the values-scale. The present, which becomes synonymous with modernity and progress is evaluated as decadent, as morally corrupt and as aesthetically inferior. This feeling of moral superiority is what distinguishes archaism from primitivism – the present is seen morally corrupt and the past becomes a refuge from the decay brought forth by the passing of time.

### 7.3 Archaism and Stigma

What is peculiar about the way users of the 273 website talk is that the stigma of Romania as a primitive space is internalized – progress is associated with ‘foreigners’ or ‘the abroad’ (*străinate*), while Romania is seen as the opposite, reflecting the internalization of a Balkanist view of Romania.<sup>167</sup> Hence the obsession with tradition, nostalgia and the golden age of the eternal past becomes a strategy of destigmatization by transforming negative primitivism into benign archaism. This is what enables a user to interpret a post that depicts unattended horses running on public paved roads<sup>168</sup> as a demonstration of an eternal Romanian character, superior to the West:

“We, the Romanians, are like this – a bit harder to align to Western standards...but precisely because of this we are as the rest of the world knows us – stubborn (not uneducated) and conservative in our traditions. I have seen domestic animals on public roads and it will be like this until I die, regardless whether we will have a new social system or not, whether they tear down our mountains or not, or simply whether someone, somewhere doesn’t agree with our way of life!”<sup>169</sup>

The ‘abroad’ may remain technologically more advanced, but is regarded as morally corrupt because it has strayed away from tradition and this is where Romania is presented as superior, because there supposedly are still pockets of archaism within the borders of the nation-state.

<sup>167</sup> For examples of Balkanist representations of Romania see Kaneva and Popescu, “National Identity Lite”; and Bârdan and Imre, “Vampire Branding: Romania’s Dark Destinations.”

<sup>168</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=625999540774194&set=a.191928127514673.45376.142699105770909&type=1&theater> [1.06.2014]

<sup>169</sup> *Noi, românii, așa suntem - un picuț mai greu de aliniat la dezideratele occidentale ...dar tocmai de aceea suntem așa cum ne știe restul lumii - încăpățânați(nu needucați) și conservatori în tradițiile noastre. De o viață văd animale domestice pe drumurile publice și până o să mi se pună pânza pe ochi tot așa va fi, indiferent dacă vom avea altă orânduire socială sau nu, ne vor dărâma munții sau nu, sau pur și simplu dacă cineva de undeva n-ar fi de acord cu modul nostru de viață !*

This explains the preference for Maramureş on the English-version of the website intended for foreigners and the almost exclusive association of Maramureş with tradition on the Romanian-language website: within this virtual public sphere a myth of Maramureş is constructed as the last stronghold of ‘pure Romanians’, of keepers of ancient traditions, of the direct descendants of the Dacians and hence as the site of the most beautiful landscapes in Romania (see Illustration 5). The way in which one commentator uses the narrative scheme of the biblical story of Genesis to depict Maramureş sums up the myth cogently: “Maramureş!!! If God made the Earth, then He first made Maramureş and gave it to us mere mortals as gift to enjoy it. And in Barsana I really felt like God was holding me in his arms. Nowhere else in Romania have I felt the same...”<sup>170</sup>

This brings the discussion onto the topic of outward projected image, which underscores the nation-brand. One of the most visible recurrent themes in the comments is that of how Romania compares to other countries, implied to be West European countries.

It is very common to find comments that proclaim the spiritual and moral superiority of Romania, which is projected onto the landscape (“Admit it: there is no country more beautiful than Romania! And I will keep saying this no matter how many wonders I see in the world”)<sup>171</sup> against ‘Europe’ (“rustic landscapes, medieval villages, wild and pure nature are hard to find in Europe”)<sup>172</sup> which may be more technologically advanced, or even more ‘civilized’, but lacks spiritual depth and has a corrupting influence morally, as was summarized by one user:

“Unfortunately these beauties are being destroyed with a frenzy worthy of a genocide. I came back from Romania with an untreatable pain in my soul. English carols are sung in shops; our stores, radio and television programs have English names...On the doors of shops writes

<sup>170</sup> *Maramureşul!!! Dacă Dumnezeu a făcut Pamântul, atunci, prima dată a făcut Maramureşul şi ni l-a făcut cadou noua, muritorilor de rând, să ne bucurăm de el. Iar la Barsana am simţit realmente că Dumnezeu mă ţine în braţe. Nicaieri în România nu m-am mai simţit la fel...*

<sup>171</sup> *Recunoaşteţi: ţara mai frumoasă ca România nu există! Si-o să spun asta oricâte minunatii aş vedea în lume.*

<sup>172</sup> *Pisajele rustice, sate medievale, natură salbatică şi pură cu greu se mai găsesc în Europa.*

“open”....And the genocide does not stop here- our children and youngsters are exterminated through drugs...ethno-botanic shops everywhere... Parents are desperate that the disease is untreatable and it affects the entire family- the whole family becomes a slave to his genocide even if they are not the addicts...and nobody is doing anything about it...”<sup>173</sup>

There are dissenters who argue against the strategy of archaism as being unrealistic and self-delusional, in effect by changing their subject position from that of the interpellated Romanian national to either that of citizen or a consumer (both are predicated on complaints about services and infrastructure), thereby legitimizing the stigma of backwardness upon themselves.

But in a telling example,<sup>174</sup> when one user dispelled the 'magic' of Maramureș by adopting the subject position of a consumer, no else agreed and instead five other users started to counter-argue. The inflammatory remark was that "For me Maramureș was the biggest disappointment. [...] the roads there were so appalling that I almost broke my car; the authentic Maramureș man and woman (which are so heavily advertised) are long gone...[...] no decent restaurants [...] bland and repetitive landscape, extreme poverty, dust and filth. This is the *traistutza* [sic] brand! [*traistă*: an archaic word for an ornamented cloth haversack]"<sup>175</sup> All the other commentators that replied to this comment minimized the complaints by employing a strategy of comparison "(the roads are bad everywhere in this country)"<sup>176</sup> and defended the myth using different strategies: exclusion of the opponent("for everyone Maramureș is a dreamland, but you didn't like anything"),<sup>177</sup> reification ("This [the roads] have

<sup>173</sup> *Din nefericire aceste frumuseti sint distruse cu o frenezie demna de un genocid. M-am intors din Romania cu o durere 'n suflet fara leac. In magazine se cina colinde englezesti; magazinele, programele de radio si televiziune au nume englezesti... Pe usile magazinelor scrie "open".... Si genocidul nu se opreste aici- copii si tinerii nostri sint exterminati prin droguri...Magazine etno-botanice la tot pasul ...Parinti disperati ca boala e incurabila si afecteaza intreaga familie- tota familia devine sclava acestui genocid chiar daca nu sint ei cei dependenti.... Si nimeni nu face nimic...*

<sup>174</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=611528662221282&set=a.191928127514673.45376.142699105770909&type=1&theater> [1.06.2014]

<sup>175</sup> *Pentru mine cea mai mare dezamagire a fost Maramuresul[...] Drumul pana acolo a fost execrabil aproape sa iti rupi masina; autenticul maramuresan (pe care se bate atata moneda) a disparit de mult [...]; un restaurant decent nu exista [...], peisaj nici uniform si repetabil, saracie lucie, praf si mizerie[...]. Asta-i brandul cu traistutza! [...]*

<sup>176</sup> *drumurile sunt rele peste tot in tara*

<sup>177</sup> *pt toti Maramuresul e un taram de vis dar tie nu ti-a placut nimic*

nothing to do with the beauty and folkloric richness of Maramureș. The authentic Maramureș man and woman still exists [...]”<sup>178</sup> and personal experience “([...] I have worked 7 years in Vișeu de Sus. Maramureș is an extraordinary area, it will never leave my soul”).<sup>179</sup>

## 7.4 Nostalgia and Migration

The “I came back from Romania” from the comment quoted above indicates that the position of the speaker as an émigré. Users that express or at least hint at their status as migrants usually talk in highly nostalgic terms about their relation with ‘Romania.’ Previously I have given examples of how personal experiences evoked by grandparent figures are interpreted through a national filter in the context of migration. But nostalgia, nationalism and migration are linked even more clearly in relation to landscape itself, as the following comment shows:

“whenever I go back to Romania my soul fills with emotion when I see the mountains the marvelous landscapes I would hang my souls on the highest peak and revel in all that my sight can capture to breath the mountain air to enjoy the marvelous nature to dream at great heights to be a little closer to god...but I have so little time [...]”<sup>180</sup>

This nostalgia is compounded by the perceived tragic character of migration, which is always talked about as a necessary evil, a result of the force of circumstances brought about by corruption and bad governing. Migration breaks the isomorphism between nation, state and territory<sup>181</sup> and this is felt acutely at the personal level as violation of a sacred world order. The understanding of migration as an event that disturbs the national, ‘normal’ order of things is evidenced by the stigma attached to the colloquial term “căpșunar” (strawberry-picker), denominating a low-skilled *gastarbeiter*. Reified national landscapes play a part in this dynamic too, as the following comment shows disapproval of working on ‘foreign’ soil as an

<sup>178</sup> *Cred ca nu au nimic de-a face drumurile (care sunt ingrozitoare in TOATA Romania) cu frumusetea si bogatia folclorica a Maramuresului. Autenticul maramuresan exista inca [...]*

<sup>179</sup> *am lucrat 7 ani la Viseul de Sus. Maramuresul este o zona extaordinara, n-o sa-mi iasa niciodata din suflet.*

<sup>180</sup> *cind ma intorc vad rominia din avion mi se umple sufletul de emotie cind vad muntii peisaje mirifice mi-as agata sufletul in virful cel mai inalt si m-as delecta cu tot ce privirea poate cuprinde sa respir aer de munte sa ma bucur de natura mirifica sa visez la inaltime sa fiu un pic mai aproape de dumnezeu...dar am atit de puti timp*

<sup>181</sup> see Wimmer and Glick Schiller, “Methodological Nationalism and beyond.”



alternative to working the 'national' soil: "it's easier for us to go pick strawberries and wipe foreigner's bottoms than to get dirty and work the soil"<sup>182</sup>

Migrants thus describe their plight as "being unfortunately forced to work on foreign lands"<sup>183</sup> or as having to "work for others, to make money, to get back to what we left home."<sup>184</sup> These tropes of estrangement and of 'no alternative' underline the tragic character of migrants' situation and thus constitute an *argumentum ad passiones* that hedges their uncertain place in the national imaginary, reinforcing their position as national subjects.

### 7.5 National iconography

Now that the textual information of the website and the input of the user base were analyzed and the myths, repertoires, strategies and discourses employed in this virtual space have been identified, it is possible to make sense of the photographic side of the website. For the reasons already mentioned, the visual information in this virtual space is talked about in a decidedly national, even nationalistic frame, which means that the corpus of photographs forms an iconography of nationhood. Previous iconographical studies offer a convincing way in which to interpret this data. To give an illuminating historical example; in 1881 the Christmas edition of the London Graphic featured a set of 'typical' Canadian scenes, which mainly revolved around snow and ice. This illustration of Canada as a frontier land of snow and ice provoked an outrage in Canada, where the colonists resented what they perceived to be the portrayal of their country as a cold, backward wilderness<sup>185</sup>. For these reasons, Canadian landscape painting avoided these themes, preferring instead to illustrate the orderliness and prosperity of colonial settlements and left the 'wilderness' in the background, this being more in tune with the self-image of 19th century Canadians as hard-working people who tamed and

<sup>182</sup> *mai usor la cules capsuni si la spalat strainii la fund decat sa punem mana pe sapa!*

<sup>183</sup> *din ne fericire sintem fortati sa muncim pe paminturi straine*

<sup>184</sup> *muncim pt.altii,sa facem bani,pt.a ne intoarce la ceea ce am lasat acasa*

<sup>185</sup> Osborne, "The Iconography of Nationhood in Canadian Art," 166.

civilized the austere land <sup>186</sup>. What is to be taken from this example is that the landscapes of 'their' country that a society prefers gives us an insight into how people perceive their surroundings, how they perceive themselves and how they would like to be. In more exact technical terms, the taste in landscape unveils information about the self-perception and the normative aspects of the discourse on collective-identity that is prevalent in a community at a certain time.

So then what can be deduced from the landscapes popular in the 273 community? In a nutshell, it can be deduced that authenticity, spirituality, purity and 'naturalness' are the ideals of the national identity discourse present in this community. In a sense, it is the opposite ideal of the 19th century Canadian taste talked about earlier: Romanians view themselves or would like to view themselves as in touch with nature, as spiritual, as authentic, in contrast to an absent Other that is artificial, decadent and spoiled. Orderliness and civilization is shunned in favor of the organic complexity of unspoiled nature. Whereas the wilderness was considered to be the locus of negative primitivism in the historical example, in the 273 community the same concept of wilderness is turned into positive archaism. If primitivism is the absence of progress and hence of modernity, archaism is the cure to modernity's faults.

## 7.6 Escape into the national

In a virtual community based on the circulation of landscape photography and tourism, it goes without saying that the most popular photographs will be the ones that, simply put in colloquial terms, are most beautiful. But what exactly is 'beautiful'? Judging from the sample I surveyed and the popularity of photographs in terms of number of likes, comments and shares, a clear pattern emerges: most popular are those photos that feature mountainous landscapes with no or few signs of human activity, children in clean folk costumes, well-

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<sup>186</sup>Ibid., 162–169.

known historical monuments whose lighting and angle give a mystical or fairy-tale-like quality to them (see Illustration 6). The photos that in some way are more than real are judged by the community to be the best. This is a strange finding considering that, on the face of it, the community is mostly looking for naturalness in the landscapes they see. Considering that the fairy-tale-like natural landscapes are interpreted within the community as evidence of the beauty of 'Romania' as an abstract idea, and that mystical-looking photographs of historical monuments (see Illustration 7) more often than not imply a nostalgia for the past, it seems that an escapist fantasy is being constructed in this virtual space. It seems that what 273 is offering is an escape into the national, into an ideal of 'Romania' as an authentic land of tradition, purity and harmony. This begs the question, what is this an escape from? As I have shown in the first chapter of this analysis, this website is on the surface level apolitical in character, in the sense that it is not involved in partisan politics and rarely takes a stance on current issues. I therefore argue that the escape is from vernacular politics and everyday debate into the nation, which is seen as a morally uncompromised stable space, which is taken to be embodied in the physical geography of the land. Herein lies the wide appeal of 273: it provides a virtual refuge from everyday hardships and everyday politics, which is perceived as inherently immoral, by constructing an idealized version of the pure nation which is given concrete, visual expression in the landscape.

## 8. Conclusions

The 273 online community constitutes a public sphere in which the apparent focus on tourism and photography camouflages a deeply embedded obsession with the nation. Even though the multi-modal and multi-layered nature of the resulting text allows the casual user to just focus on the touristic side of things, whose relation to nationalism may only be the fact that it framed by the borders of a nation-state, the stated nationalist discourse that lies behind the architecture of the website allows users to effortlessly direct the flow of the text towards blatant displays of nationalisms. The vagueness of the message, the framing of the website as a leisure site which relaxes any tensions that might arise and the appeal to the lowest common denominator give the website this great flexibility.

The references to well-known natural or historical monuments, national myths, the celebration of sporting achievements, the portrayal of traditions already sanctified by pre-existing nationalist discourses all contribute to constructing a nationally-delimited public sphere which invites its users, whom it interpellates as Romanian nationals, to reflect and talk about the nation. The result is that 273 becomes a depository of vulgar understandings of national identity and nationalist discourses. The object of reference of these discussion always remains 'Romania', a reified, sometimes personified entity, at once beloved and praised, criticized and insulted. Discussions about the beauty of nature portrayed in the photographs automatically become discussions about the beauty of the 'country', which flow seamlessly into the venting of grievances about everyday hardships such as lacking infrastructure and public services, corruptions, bad governing and ultimately about the character of the 'Romanian people.'

It is this negative side of reality as experienced by users that make the existence of a discursive construction like 273 possible. Whenever the general mood in the comments

becomes very pessimistic it is very common to find users that admonish the focus of others on negative aspects of public life, inevitably interpreted as national issues due to banal nationalism, and urge everyone to focus on positive things about 'Romania.' This type of intervention basically summarizes the *raison d'être* of the website: the representation of landscapes first of all as evidence of the beauty of the nation (with tourism being only an incidental side-effect) is a strategy of perpetuation of the nation by positive self-representation through the use of the topos of the lovely, idyllic place (*locus amoenus*).

The idyllic in this online public sphere is inextricably linked to the concept of archaism as a way of situating 'Romania's' place into a world of nations in a way that can generate feelings of pride for those who identify with it. Archaism is signified here through the figures of grandparents and a particular image of the village. Tradition is the concept that guides the representation of landscape and the framing of human characters.

The strategy of positive self-representation through archaism would not make sense without the perceived stigma that users feel they must face as Romania nationals. The complaints about services, infrastructure, corruption and public politics in general all feed into the Western-held stereotype of Romania as a backward, primitive country. The negative primitivism is transformed into positive archaism, which justifies the technological and political backwardness as a symptom of a commendable adherence to tradition. Thus national identity is destigmatized because 'the Romanian people' is now spiritually and morally pure thanks to its maintenance of tradition, which justifies the technological backwardness compared to the West, which is painted in negative terms as decadent and morally corrupting. This spiritual purity and moral righteousness is then projected onto geographical space which becomes national landscape.

This strategy of destigmatization through archaism helps explain the prevalence of photographs that show wild mountainous landscapes, villages with no trace of industrialization that blend into nature and of religious monuments such as medieval churches and monasteries, both on the internally-oriented Romanian website and on the externally-oriented English website. This is the nation-brand that is constructed within this virtual space.

Archaism was not developed within the virtual confines of 273 - it is a legacy of a nationalist discourse from the interwar period that was appropriated and taken to new heights by the communist regime, whose effects are still being felt today because of a lack of reform in history teaching. This explains the website's tendency for homogeneity, manifested in its silence on the existence of national minorities. Token attention is given to Hungarian culture in Romania, which causes the mobilization of a nationalist anti-Hungarian repertoire, though this tendency seems to be met more with disapproval, while examples of inter-ethnic harmony in the form of friendly exchanges between users of different ethnicities as Romanians and Hungarians seem to be more popular. This phenomenon, however, remains marginal and seems to be more of an effect of the built-in political correctness of Facebook. Political correctness, however, stops when dealing with Roma culture, which goes completely uncelebrated, and the only way that the Roma are represented in this space is through the figure of the 'Gypsy', which is only used derisively and as a scapegoating strategy.

The '273 places to see before you leave Romania' virtual community thus gives concrete visual expression to an ideal of the nation, to a 'Romania' as a land of tradition, purity and harmony. It is a space where everyday grievances can be expressed and calmed down and stigmas can be removed by escaping into the national. It is a deeply conservative counter-discourse to discourses of self-deprecation coming from within the in-group and to stigmatizing discourses from without.

## 9. Appendix



**Illustration 1.** Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=674889085885239&set=a.675594925814655.1073741844.142699105770909&type=3&theater>



**Illustration 2.** Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=534268076614008&set=a.537725296268286.121114.142699105770909&type=3&theater>





**Illustration 3.** Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=185017374872415&set=a.172780232762796.37274.142699105770909&type=3&theater>



**Illustration 4.** Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=625902667450548&set=a.191928127514673.45376.142699105770909&type=1&theater>





**Illustration 5.** Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=611528662221282&set=a.191928127514673.45376.142699105770909&type=1&theater>



**Illustration 6.** Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=676080869099394&set=a.394084540632363.93551.142699105770909&type=1&theater>



**Illustration 7.** Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=681964381844376&set=a.670298419677639.1073741843.142699105770909&type=1&theater>



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