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## ROMANIA SEEN THROUGH FOREIGN EYES: PRINCE CHARLES AND THE TRANSYLVANIAN/ROMANIAN CONNECTION<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract:* It is no secret that, over the past three decades, Romanian migrants have contributed to an ambivalent image of Romania and that cultural stereotypes have heavily influenced the negative portrayal of Romanians in European media, particularly so in the case of British newspapers (cf. Mădroane 2014). Among the people who have fought against such stereotypes is the Prince of Wales, who has endeavoured to promote a thoroughly positive image of Transylvania (and, by extension, of Romania) with its natural beauties, resources and traditions. What this paper aims to do is to explore this aspect as well as its effects in Romanian newspapers over a period of approximately eight years (2011-2018).

*Keywords:* imagology, Prince Charles, Romanian newspapers, Transylvania

### 1. Introduction

The idea behind this paper came to me while reading news of Prince Charles's fascination with the region of Transylvania – on the one hand, with its villages and people, and on the other hand, with its flora –, as well as the publication of an album dedicated to the diversity of plants from this region (*Transylvania Florilegium*, due for release on 3 July 2018 by Addison Publications). The paper is meant to be read as an exploratory survey of Prince Charles's visits to the region, with the aim of identifying in the written Romanian press some major themes related to his visits, together with the attitudes embedded in the reports.

### 2. A Brief History of the Balkanist Discourse

Two concepts invented during Enlightenment, when Eastern European countries began to be explored by Western travellers, contributed enormously to the way in which the Balkan countries – Romania included – came to be perceived in the West: civilization (Wolff 1994) or progress (Hamilton 1992:37), and cultural relativism (Hamilton 1992:44-45) in relation to which the Scottish Enlightenment put forth a scale of development against which other societies/countries (European ones included) were measured. Geographically positioned in Europe, although “at the gates of the Orient” (Brînzeu 1997:235), but inhabited by white Christian peoples, the Eastern European countries have been plagued by “demi-Orientalism” (Wolff 1994:7), semi-civilization, and semi-modernization. In the words of Vesna Goldsworthy (2012:2), Balkan identity oscillates between “Europeanness” and “Oriental difference”.

“The Balkanist discourse” – crystallized as a term at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (during the Balkan Wars of 1912-13 and World War I) is a discourse of devaluation, of particularly political inferiorizing (Todorova 1994:469-471, Todorova 1997:33-37), and of subservience to higher powers in the European hierarchy (Glenny 1999). This discourse opposes orderly centre and chaotic periphery (Brînzeu 1997:77), or inclusion and exclusion (Wolff 1994).

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The Balkan space is thus a space of in-betweenness, on a bridge between civilization and barbarism, defined at first particularly by violence and the mixture of ethnicities, and then by communism (Mădroane 2014:40). Moreover, the invention of a new concept – Central Europe – in the 1980s further emphasized the Eastern European peoples' feelings of inferiority.

In an essential work about cultural stereotypes and Balkan spaces (whether real or of the mind), Vesna Goldsworthy (2012:6) contrasts “Europeanness” to “Orientalized ‘Balkanness’”, which has played the role of “an eastern Other within Europe”; Goldsworthy also mentions the devaluing discourse of Belgian politician Willy Claes (which reminds us of the above-mentioned Enlightenment scale of development), according to whom the Balkans are home to “inferior” Eastern European nations. Furthermore, Goldsworthy notes the narrative colonization of the Balkans to the benefit of the literary and entertainment industries (Goldsworthy 2012:2) first by explorers, travellers and adventurers, then by writers, and finally by popular fiction writers who have often relied on stereotypes, doing their ‘research’ from second-hand sources. Three prominent elements are mentioned, all of which can easily be connected to Romania: 1- the exotic Western monarchs who came to sit on Balkan thrones (for instance, in Romania, Carol I and Ferdinand I of the Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen House); 2- the figure of the vampire, made famous by Stoker’s novel and inspired from the Romanian historical figure of Vlad the Impaler, threatening not because of his difference, but because of his almost indistinguishable resemblance to any white civilized Western person; and 3- the Orient Express, linking the West and the East and standing for a concrete, physical embodiment of the industrial achievements of the Occident.

In her book on imagology and cultural corridors linking the cardinal points of Europe, Pia Brînzeu (1997:13) pointed out that Romanians have felt for a long time, and especially during communism, “excluded from Europe because of their economic inferiority”, further adding their marginalized position in the Balkans, and their language of restricted circulation – “Romanians have always yearned to escape the condition of a small nation [in Milan Kundera’s terms] and be integrated in Europe”. This dream became possible once with Romania’s accession to the European Union in 2007, a time when a metaphor was often present in public discourse – namely, that of Romania’s “return to the larger European family”, from which the country had been previously separated by the Iron Curtain.

The post-1989 public discourse in Romania has not missed any opportunity to profess the country’s and, implicitly, the people’s wish to ‘return to the big European family’ or, in an even looser formulation, to ‘Europe’. Unsurprisingly enough, this Europe came to be equated with the European Union, the contemporary epitome of the ‘Occident’ and its values, the Promised Land of a continent scarred by conflicts that go back to time immemorial, two world wars, and the evils of communism. The metaphor of return, confidently embraced in public rhetoric, naturally assumes that Romania was once a member of the ‘European’ family and it was only the fated Iron Curtain that mercilessly separated it from its relatives. (Mădroane 2014:36)

To put it briefly and perhaps oversimplistically, in the Romanian public discourse the country image has become a constant preoccupation during the transition period and a burning issue in the context of our country’s eager accession to the European Union. Moreover, Romania’s country image has also become of crucial importance in the context of negative media in other European countries where Romanians migrated (or intended to migrate) in search of employment (cf. Mădroane 2014).

Overall, what this paper aims to do is to bring a small contribution to imagology (especially in terms of hetero-image) by looking at the image of Romania, as seen particularly through the eyes of the Prince of Wales. It does so by exploring how the Romanian media coverage of Prince Charles’s visits to the Romanian region of Transylvania has contributed to the reconstruction of this region’s identity and, perhaps in broader lines, to country branding.

### 3. Romania as Seen by Prince Charles

After 1989, Romania's image as a country recently liberated from communism was badly affected by the Romanian migrants (especially Roma) circulation to western countries; there is the infamous case (in actual fact an urban legend, Alexe 2012) of *The Sun* publishing in 1990 a story about a group of Romanian Roma who killed and ate the swans in a Viennese park. Following an investigation, the newspaper was forced to publish a disclaimer, which it did in very small letters on a page at the back. The harm, however, had been done, as the disclaimer suggested that even if the Romanian Roma had not eaten the Viennese swans, they could do it at any time. Since then, the image of Romania abroad and especially in the British press has been rather unfavourable; for example, the infamous issue of the Romanian orphanages on the one hand, and on the other hand that of Romanian (as well as Bulgarian, Polish and Albanian – cf. Goldsworthy 2012:x) migrants “flocking” to Western Europe, especially Britain, to steal away not just the natives' jobs but also their valuables (cf. Mădroane 2014).

After Prince Charles's first visit to Romania in 1998, when only one news item in a rather local newspaper was published about his visit in Sibiu County, the press began to pay more attention to these trips starting with the spring of 2008 – a season Prince Charles favours for coming to Transylvania/Romania. This exploratory survey will therefore limit itself to a period of eight years, spanning from 2011 (when the first episode of the documentary *Wild Carpathia* was launched, including an interview with the Prince of Wales) to 2018 (when the publication of the album dedicated to Transylvanian flora was announced in May).

In order to explore the main themes related to Prince Charles's visits to Transylvania as covered by the Romanian media, I gathered a total of 17 articles and news from the most read online Romanian newspapers and news portals (*Gândul*, *Cotidianul*, *Ziare.com*, *Stirileprotv*, *Mediafax*), which were included in a corpus after a simple Google search of Prince Charles's connection to Romania. It is also important to mention that, when the news had a high degree of newsworthiness, it was covered in several mainstream newspapers, as well as by more than one news portals. Furthermore, it may seem surprising that there are very few news items that have been published in tabloids; thus, to the best of my knowledge, only one article about Prince Charles appeared in *Agenția de presă mondenă* in 2011 – emphasizing the charitable work Prince Charles has undertaken in Romania, particularly against massive deforestation, most obviously because of the release of the *Wild Carpathia* documentary.

For the purpose of this article I use mostly a qualitative analysis, i.e. identification of major themes and subthemes related to Prince Charles's visits to Transylvania. Although occasionally the Romanian articles start from information appeared in the British press about Prince Charles's visits to Transylvania (particularly in relation to the *Wild Carpathia* documentary, or to his acknowledgement of his descent from Vlad the Impaler), they may be divided into three major themes: space, people, and business.

**3.1. Space** represents the focus of attention for Prince Charles's visits; he emphasizes its uniqueness and biodiversity, and appraises (positively evaluating) Transylvanian/ Romanian landscapes. In recording the news, the articles touch on the following overlapping (sub)themes:

- the *Wild Carpathia* documentary, the first part of which was released in 2011 as part of a larger campaign against massive deforestation in Romania;
- the wilderness – pristine mountain forests, wild animals (e.g. bears, wolves, lynxes); balance between people and environment;
  - o comparison to Britain at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and to Scotland (where Prince Charles was interviewed for the documentary).
- the homes Prince Charles owns in Romania (primarily in Transylvania, but also in the region of Maramureș). An article from *Gândul* in 2013 (cf. Stoica 2013) lists all of his properties in Romania: four houses at Breb (Maramureș County); the Apafi Manor at Mălâncrav (Sibiu County); the house at Viscri (Brașov County), previously nicknamed one of the “Crown

pearls” (together with the house at Mălâncrav, Sibiu County – according to Tapalaga 2006), is the most widely visited by tourists (less than 100 before the purchase vs. 10,000 in 2013 and 20,000 in 2015 – cf. Stoica 2013, Sultănoiu 2015); and four houses in Valea Zălanului (Covasna County);

- preservation of the remaining old-fashioned furniture and straw beds (where available) in the houses he bought. In addition to this, local gypsies (especially at Viscri) were (re)taught to use traditional materials to reconstruct and renovate the houses: e.g. lime and sand; iron nails made by the local smith (cf. Tapalaga 2006);
- emphasis on the Saxon Connection; the only negative comment made in relation to Prince Charles’s properties from refers to his promoting Saxon villages in Transylvania – therefore an ethnic minority – and not genuinely Romanian ones (Popescu 2017).
- the harmonious nature – diversity of wild flora, six times more species per square metre than in Britain;
- the landscapes preserved unlike anywhere else in Europe (Popescu 2017);
  - *Transylvania Florilegium* – published on request since 3 July 2018 –celebrates precisely this beautiful diversity;
  - Prince Charles is said to have taken species to his own house in Gloucestershire;
- the description of what Prince Charles consider to be our country brand: “[the] mixture of genuine values and traditions, old architecture, the taste of your food, the ancestral fabric of your communities, the unique biodiversity and your capacity for innovation – they all make you special” (Rus 2017; my translation).

**3.2.** As regards the **people and the ways they interact with nature**, the following subthemes could be identified:

- Prince Charles’s descent from Vlad Țepeș;
  - visit to the tombstones of other relatives (Zamfira and Petru Racz, cf. Rus 2017)
- the crafts and handmade objects, from clothing to furniture (for instance, traditional waistcoat-making, leather items, local honey);
  - colourful hand-knitted socks – sold at almost every gate at Viscri
- the unaltered centuries-old traditions;
  - agriculture without pesticides; organic produce (true value lying in the product); cheap but tasty food
  - *Transylvanian Florilegium* – celebrating the biodiversity of Transylvanian flora, which serves as inspiration for traditional folk costumes (especially the “ie”, the Romanian folk blouse)
- the harmonious relationship with nature, using all resources available.

**3.3.** To the two major themes above, together with their multiple subthemes, a third one may be added – i.e. **business**, more specifically Prince Charles’s business in Romania, an aspect covered by specialized/niche economic newspapers (e.g. *Bancherul*, *Ziarul financiar*). In relation to this third major theme, the following subthemes have emerged:

- Prince Charles’s charities and charitable work (MET – Mihai Eminescu Trust; The Prince of Wales Foundation);
  - profitability (his houses can be rented at higher rates than other guest houses in the area);
- improvement of life in Transylvanian villages;
- Prince Charles as promoter/ambassador of Romanian tourism;
- Prince Charles ‘the saviour’, a potential king of Romania, provided he converts to Orthodoxy (cf. Matei 2011, information taken from *Daily Mail*); the information resurfaced in 2017 (cf. Ganea 2017).

As a side comment to this last piece of news, I would add that Prince Charles's initials would definitely match the ones of Prince Charming if he would only consider saving a country in distress on more than one levels.

In general, what all the analysed newspaper articles and news items seem to highlight is that Transylvania as a region and, by extension, Romania as a country were brought to international attention as having something valuable to offer. For Romanian journalists, the most important achievement seems to be the gaining – or perhaps the recognition – of a spot on the European (if not global) map. This is what Prince Charles's visits and even his business, including his charities (despite of or in addition to the occasional money-making speculations), have achieved for each of the villages where he owns houses, but especially for Viscri, the most publicized of his properties. They resulted in better living standards for the villagers; for instance, the ecological water purification plant inaugurated at Viscri in 2011, better (although far from good) roads of access, mobile network signal, higher market value for traditional houses in the village and in the area.

The general feeling emerging from these articles – despite the occasional negative comment on Prince Charles's investments or the favouring of the Saxon communities over authentic Romanian ones – is that of pride not only that Romania has been noticed by a public figure, and a prince at that, but that it does have something genuinely valuable that it can also teach others. Consequently, what the articles I have looked at in this paper seem to emphasize is what the prince of Wales believes that Transylvania/Romania *can* teach the West: it is a lesson about the preservation of each country's, as well as Europe's on the whole, natural heritage (its flora and fauna) on the one hand, while on the other hand, a return to a more rural lifestyle – read in a positive key, as a harmonious relationship with nature (which would imply organic agriculture, as well as the active promotion of the idea that nature and traditions are an advantage for modern life). It is by drawing attention to the natural Transylvanian/Romanian beauties (wilderness, flower species, wild animals) and the harmonious relationship between people and nature that Prince Charles has succeeded in moving Transylvania (at least, if not the entire Romania) from the periphery of Europe to its privileged centre.

As a reward for his efforts to promote the Romanian natural and cultural heritage and tourism, in 2017, The Babeş Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca awarded Prince Charles the title of Doctor Honoris Causa for promoting and valorising the Romanian cultural and natural heritage; the Prince of Wales was designated a “protector of Transylvania and Romania” (cf. Măgrădean 2017).

#### 4. Conclusions

I cannot conclude this paper without drawing attention to the fact that Prince Charles's attention for Transylvania/Romania have opened for the country the door to a process of “self-exoticisation”, as termed by Vesna Goldsworthy (2012:xxiii), with Transylvanians/ Romanians taking pride in these visits and becoming increasingly aware of our country's potential in terms of natural resources and traditions. For the time being, however, the work of Prince Charles may be read as an eye-opener for the locals (the ordinary Romanian citizens), who have learnt to appreciate and valorise what the region/country still has to offer, rather than for the people in positions of authority who could actually improve Romania's reputation abroad.

Nevertheless, the efforts of Prince Charles himself and of his charity foundations have made an immense contribution to a positive redefinition of a core eastern European region (Transylvania) – if not country (Romania) – this time by something that the capitalist and highly industrialized West no longer has: wilderness and a rural lifestyle in complete harmony with nature. In Prince Charles's opinion, the East *can* – and I would add here *finally* – teach the West a thing or two: a return to a simpler life, an appreciation of simple but comfortable homes, handmade clothing and food, and the usage of natural resources to the fullest.

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