



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°8 | November 2018


Fondation Pierre du Bois
pour l'histoire du temps présent

The Irony of Triumph: The Muddled Commemorations of Romania's Great Unification

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In 2018 Central and Eastern European countries commemorate a century since a plethora of political, economic, and deeply societal changes took place. The end of the First World War saw the dissolution of European empires and a subsequent redrawing of borders. What followed was a kaleidoscope of new or newly-expanded national states faced with long-term processes of (re-) construction. For Romania, 1918 represented the time of the consolidation of an ideal already expressed during the 1848 revolutions which sought autonomy of the three core provinces, Moldavia, Wallachia, and Transylvania. In 1918 this ideal meant the completion of unification with the territories that lay within the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empire, respectively. Moreover, it meant the establishment of sovereignty, the strengthening of the Romanian nation, and the defining of a "national consciousness" in this new, larger, and multi-ethnic state.

In the summer of 1916 the government made the decision for Romania to enter the First World War on the side of the Allies. The decision was politically exploited as an act of bravery, meant to achieve the long-sought Unification and a triumph of sovereignty from the European empires. The Allies won the war and Greater Romania was formally established on 1 December 1918. For this reason, the participation in the war was described in triumphalist terms, as a "sacrifice" made by Romanians for the specific purpose of defining a national ideal reached through Unification and the creation of the Greater Romania nation-state.

In the last 100 years the Romanian commemoration of the 1918-moment had various facets, as it meant different things for different regimes, regions or communities. What transpired, however, was that the remembrance of the Unification has become deeply political, institutional, and arguably rigid in its public manifestation. Time and time again the remembrance of the events in 1918 represented a discursive avenue to justify decision-making, as well as legitimize and strengthen the in-power regime. However, the Centenary of the Great Unification "triumph" has become a quiet and rather void event in 2018. In fact, despite public efforts of memorialization through performative means, its commemoration has been muddled in recurrent politicking and discursive political backbiting. What is more, the decades of institutionalization and politicization of this historical moment fractured public reaction and overall engagement with the commemoration itself.



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The Post-1918 Patterns of Commemoration

A historical overview of the broad thematic choices in discursive and in performative forms of commemoration shows that political elites adapted the triumph of 1918 to various agendas. In this, the commemoration of the Unification has been disjointed, often tied to the contextual and oft-changing interpretations of the meaning of the event.

The commemorations that took place immediately in the next decades after the Unification focused primarily on memorializing the military actions and the intense diplomatic activities in order to achieve autonomy and unification of territories. Ultimately, this had been a national aspiration defined during the revolutions of 1848 and carried into the decision regarding participation in the First World War, and in subsequent nation-building and state-building projects of the interwar period.¹ During this period of sociopolitical change, Transylvania, one of the provinces that united with the Old Kingdom, was the space where commemorations of the Unification carried the most gravitas. In the end, it was there where the process completed and where the Unification was formalized through a public ceremony and declaration in the town of Alba Iulia. At the same time, continuous tensions between Romanians and Hungarians after the 1918 moment and the extension of war in 1919 spurred discourses of Romanization of the territory, giving a region-specific meaning to the commemoration. For instance, Transylvanian leaders' discourses that followed in the decades after 1 December 1918 took nationalist undertones, and focused on the remembrance of martyrdoms of Romanians against the brutal Hungarian rule and the fight of freedom on behalf of the national ideal of Greater Romania.²

The 25th anniversary of 1 December 1918 took place in 1943, in the midst of the Second World War. By then, General Ion Antonescu had established a nationalist military dictatorship, a regime that tried to imitate Fascist Italy, while focused on the continuation of a Romanian nation-building process started in the aftermath of the Unification. During the Second World War, Antonescu allied with Germany, profoundly driven by his anti-communist feelings, thus declaring himself "an ally of the Reich against Russia."³ Still, the war started catastrophically for Romania. In June 1940 the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact forced Romania to settle a claim to the Soviet Union over Bessarabia and Bukovina. Consequently, Hungary aimed to put in motion the revisionist post-Trianon Treaty aspirations of re-securing control over its lost Transylvanian territories. As Hungary threatened to regain Transylvania, Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, the other Axis allies, pushed for an arbitration. In August 1940 the Second Vienna Award was ratified and essentially meant Romania's loss of Northern Transylvania.⁴ It was in this context that the commemoration of the Unification under Antonescu was appropriated to the re-establishment of borders in the name of a "thousand years of common identity."⁵ The recovery of the Transylvanian region and the maintaining of the borders in the fight against Bolshevism in the East became crucial for Antonescu and his government for the establishment and eventual strengthening of a purely Romanian national identity. In this context, he framed the remembrance of the 1918-moment as an example of profound martyrdom to defend the Romanian nation, which he considered the effective "gatekeeper" of Europe. The meaning of the Unification thus became directly connected to



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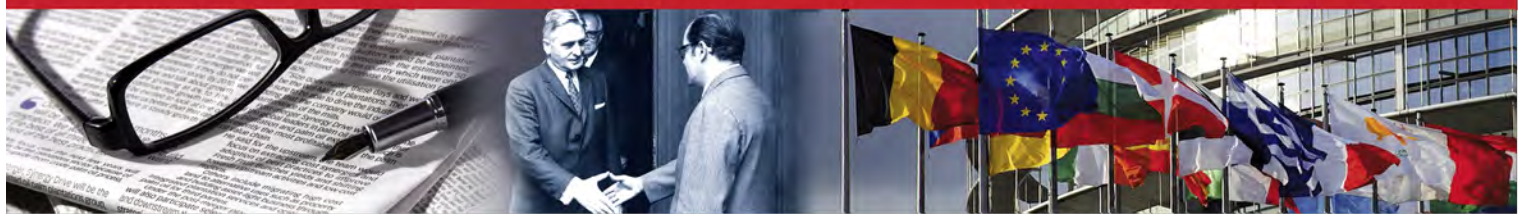
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the problematic consequences of war, and embedded in a discourse of sacrifice and fighting for control of its borders. In this way, the Antonescu regime aimed to mobilize soldiers and even civilians into the cause of Romanian belligerence. This largely mirrored the discourse of the political leadership during the First World War, when the project of Greater Romania became in many ways a metonym of the Romanian entry and human sacrifice during the conflagration.

By 1945 Antonescu had been forcefully removed from power, and Romania had turned to an alliance with the Soviet Union. But once the war ended and the communists took over Romania, the commemoration of the Unification was thoroughly sidelined, and the 1918-moment became taboo in this period. In effect, the date and the Unification in 1918 had represented a positioning of Romania against Bolshevism. Moreover, the Soviet Union's *de facto* control over Bessarabia after the Second World War arguably influenced the underlying dismissal of the commemoration of the Unification. In fact, during this time, the preference was for 23 August 1944 to be national day, marking the moment when the Romanian government changed sides during the war. But in 1968, the date of the Unification, 1 December, reappeared as a prominent event in the official discourse, a form of internal and external legitimization sought by Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu. By that year Ceaușescu had indeed consolidated his control over the Communist Party and began to embark on constructing a new type of socialist, deeply nationalist regime. The year 1968 marked the 50-year anniversary of the Unification and the communist leadership decided to make it an important event, largely in order to strengthen internal legitimization of their regime. This was best emphasized in the establishment of the Museum of the Communist Party that developed an exhibition specifically to honor this anniversary milestone. According to curators' reports that historian Maria Bucur gathered in early 2000s, themes surrounding the monarchy or the separation of Bessarabia in the aftermath of the Second World War were never mentioned.⁶ The trend was, however, to highlight that the 1918-moment was a consequence of centuries of struggle for freedom of Romanian people, ever since the Roman Empire conquests of the ancient territory of Dacia in 105-106 A.D. It was during this period that nationalist discourse around an autonomous and free Romania crystallized during the socialist era. From then on, the date and the 1918-moment would be embedded in the rhetoric and imagery of the Romanian communist leadership.

Until 1989 the commemorations remained in tune with the growing cult of personality that Ceaușescu had developed. The meaning of the date itself had been however lost, the history of the Unification essentially sidelined from practices of remembrance. In effect, the attention was on the lavish manifestations of Ceaușescu's power, while the public remained a passive witness to this public worshipping. During this period, the commemoration of the Unification was a practical enabler of power.⁷

After 1989, 1 December and its commemoration took a poignant meaning. The return to declaring this date as the national holiday and its reinsertion in political discourse as a turn to pluralist democratic traditions was meant to break with the communist past. However, at the first commemoration of the Great Unification, on 1 December 1990,



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the grand ceremony in Alba Iulia involved public manifestations against dissidents of the communist era, such as Corneliu Coposu, considered an opponent of the newly-established Ion Iliescu government.⁸ Iliescu and his new party, the National Salvation Front, essentially a “splinter-wing” of the Communist Party, won an election that was tarnished by the use of secret police to intimidate opposition or misuse and even abuse media resources. In this context, the commemoration of the Unification was turned into an arena in which the new illiberal government attempted to legitimize its power grab and undermine its opposition, essentially symbolized by Coposu.

Nonetheless, the symbolic town of Alba Iulia and the commemoration of the Unification was embedded in political discourse of the opposition as well. In November 1996 Emil Constantinescu, the leader of the opposition of the Iliescu government, won. With that, a promise of a new Romania separated from the illiberal continuum of communism emerged. Upon his success, Constantinescu indicated that he would have the inaugural ceremony held in Alba Iulia, a public manifestation of what he defined as the new face of the country: liberal, pluralistic, and free. The ceremony in Alba Iulia never took place. Still, this represented a significant defining of the triumphs of 1918-moment in the political discourse of the post-1989 period: the making of a liberal, complete, and deeply European Romania.

Indeed, the politicization and institutionalization of the 1918-moment continued in the post-1989 period. In the years after the fall of communism, new and old political elites appropriated the commemoration and correlated their own decision-making to the post-1918 aspirations of Romanian modernization and its European integration. What emerged was a discourse that emphasized a continuous preoccupation with monarchy, and a triumphalist attitude towards political leaders' success at the Paris Peace Conference, namely the establishment of the Greater Romania project. This is manifested publicly through performance-driven commemorations since 1989, mostly focused on the martyrdom of the fallen soldiers, displayed through military parades and laying of flowers at important monuments dedicated to First World War casualties and leadership involved in the Unification in 1918. Further, there has been a continuous emphasis on Romanians' Christian origins, as well as attention on cultural events that primarily engage with folklore as manifestations of Romanian-ness. Importantly, a large meeting takes place at Alba Iulia every year, always attended by representatives of the government and major parties from Bucharest. In fact, political leadership of the post-1989 period has repeatedly enabled and sustained the triumphalist narrative surrounding the moment of the Unification and Romanian participation to war. In this, they instrumentalized the commemoration of the 1918 moment, embedding its symbolism in the general politicking that takes place in Romania's legislative and executive spaces. But ultimately, this long-term politicization and elites' discursive appropriation of the 1918-moment fractured its meaning in the public arena.



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The "Hollow" Centenary

In 2017 the anniversary of 100 years since the bloody battle of Mărășești in the First World War, and the death of King Michael I, the quintessential symbol of Old Romania, was met with widespread emotion and an overt public attachment to the stories of heroism and sacrifice of the past. At the same time, the eve of the centennial year signaled a look into the future of the country. This was expressed in late 2017, when the Romanian Foreign Minister Teodor Meleşcanu declared that the future of Romania should be molded on its past, as the presidency of the Council of the European Union that Romania is supposed to hold in 2019 would be tied into the "Year of the Centenary." In this, Meleşcanu's statement mirrored the interwar sentiment of political elites who established the future of Romania as profoundly European.⁹

In reality, however, the performative dimension of commemoration has been heterogeneous and limited in scope. Local administrators committed to plant trees or organize festivals, folklore-oriented concerts, or exhibitions. Thematically, the sacrifice of Romanian soldiers for the Unification and the glorification of diplomatic efforts remain central to discourses of remembrance. At the same time, further attention has been given to exhibitions or naming of parks and monuments that would commemorate forms of external assistance, such as the French military aid, American Red Cross humanitarian presence in the Eastern part of Romania, or even Woodrow Wilson's "friendship" in the aftermath of war. In this way, the cultural facet of the commemoration has broadly engaged with the leitmotif of Romania's European-ness and its status as an ally of the West.

Still, despite these activities and events, the centennial celebrations remain in the background in terms of public manifestations. In fact, political leaders have used the "Year of the Centenary" as a discursive justification of decision-making, negotiation and even infighting during a time of feeble alliances and recurrent public protests against corruption scandals. In one instance, the government led by the Social-Democrats approved a legislation push that would make Magyar an official language in Transylvania; at its core, this was a move in strengthening coalitions with the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania and secure political majority in the Parliament. Publicly, the Social-Democrats justified this choice as a move to celebrate diversity enabled by the Unification itself. In another instance, President Klaus Iohannis, an opponent of the Social-Democrats vehemently slated the government's lack of practical action around the event.¹⁰ Moreover, the leadership of Liberal Party represented by Iohannis took ownership of its opposition by condemning the poor governance of the Social-Democrats as "mockery" of the "ideals of Greater Romania."¹¹ Such comments also came from the midst of the Social-Democrats as Ecaterina Andronescu, one of the long-term abiding figures in the party called for the resignation of its leadership. Otherwise, she stated, "...the country, in the Centenary Year, will go to the abyss..."¹² These instances of public discourse show that the Centenary and the 1918-moment has essentially become a theme of contemporary Romanian political lobbying and negotiation, often a public justification of decision-making by various political



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actors. By and large, the discursive activation of the “Centenary” has represented an attempted mobilization of electoral sentiment towards this moment of historical triumph.

However, the event remains an arguably void moment in the engagement of the public, and it is precisely its long-term politicization that renders the popular involvement moot. Some sociological studies revealed a rather ambivalent and often detached attitude of the larger population. In one study, 73% of the interviewees declared overt “pride” regarding the historical significance of the Unification.¹³ However, other numbers reveal that only 20% of the population paid attention to celebrations on 1 December in 2017, with over 55% of the interviewees declaring that the Centenary itself does not carry any meaning for them.¹⁴

Beyond this seemingly intrinsic apathy regarding the commemoration, social tensions have also subverted its potential manifestation and overall outreach in the public arena. For the past 2 years formal and informal civil society has taken to the streets to protest the in-power government and the ruling coalition between the Social-Democrats and Alliance of Liberals and Democrats. In August 2018 over 150,000 people protested in a condemnation of the Social-Democrats to weaken the judicial system and change anti-corruption measures.¹⁵ For many disenfranchised sectors of the population, the checks and balances of the last 100 years prove a grim picture of political corruption and manipulation, and unaddressed poverty as the prevailing perception is that elites are stealing the wealth of the nation. In this context, the long-term intense politicization and appropriation of meaning of the 1918-moment also altered perceptions of commemoration in the public arena. For the general public, its remembrance has become yet another platform for politicians to take the center stage, and enable a nationalist discourse for electoral purposes.

More recently, some voices attached the commemoration of the Unification to a referendum proposing constitutional changes to define marriage as a union between a man and a woman. The political supporters of the referendum related this move to the “Year of the Centenary,” a defining and even celebratory moment of the “Romanian nation.” Moreover, the representatives of the Romanian Orthodox Church explicitly described this referendum as a protection of the traditional family, and, ultimately, a strengthening of Romanian identity through its Christian values, in the name of the Centenary.¹⁶ The referendum itself was invalid and deemed a failure of the incumbent party, with less than 20% of the voting population participating. What it revealed however, was a further attempt to politically appropriate the meaning of the Unification and of the Centenary, based on a nationalist discourse enabled to persuade the electorate of the country. However, it also demonstrated a deep disengagement of the population from this discourse. Effectively, the attachment of the commemoration of the Centenary to a deeply political and ossified institutional arena subverted the general public’s engagement.

Romanian public consciousness relates the Great Unification in 1918 to a moment of deep triumph, an achievement of ideals of autonomy and practical manifestation of long-sought unity. In the past 100 years the commemoration of the event differed in terms of discourse, performance, and direct memorialization. The binding pattern remains,



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however, the appropriation of meaning of the event and its instrumentalization for political purposes. This is nothing new in Central and Eastern Europe, as the end of the First World War and the redrawing of borders have been commemorated in relation to specific political agendas, whether it is the overtly public celebration of Polish independence or the public denunciation of the Trianon Treaty in Hungary. In Romania the conventional nationalist discourse describes the Centenary as ultimate recognition of national unity, a historical triumph of autonomy for a long-suffering nation at the expense of foreign interests. However, the practical commemoration of this triumph of 1918 has ironically become a hollow event, a side-show in contemporary Romania, ultimately tangled in muddled political scheming, heavily institutionalized, and disjointed in its outreach in the public arena.

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¹ Alexandru Vaida-Voevod Speech, 29 November 1919. Taken from “Discursuri la comemorarea Marii Uniri,” Centenarul Romaniei 1918-2018. Accessed at <http://centenarulromaniei.ro/discursuri-comemorare-marea-unire-anul-1919/>

² Silviu Dragomir, “Un Sfert de Veac dela Unirea Transilvaniei,” *Transilvania*, Year 74, No. 11-12 (Nov.-Dec. 1943), 794-820.

³ Dennis Deletant, *Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940-1944* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 92

⁴ Holly Case, *Between States: The Transylvanian Question and the European Idea during World War II* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

⁵ “Unirea,” *Timpul*, Year 7, No. 2358 (2 December 1943), 1. Taken from Maria Bucur, “Birth of a Nation: Commemorations of 1 December 1918, and National Identity in Twentieth-Century Romania,” in *Staging the Past: The Politics of Commemoration in Habsburg Central Europe, 1848 to Present*, edited by Maria Bucur and Nancy Merriwether Wingfield (Purdue University Press, 2000), 303.

⁶ Bucur, “Birth of a Nation,” 306

⁷ Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology under Socialism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995).

⁸ “Discursul lui Corneliu Coposu de la Alba Iulia, din 1 December 1990.” Accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WqOPpSV0GEs>

⁹ Taken from “Teodor Meleşcanu: Pregătirea Marelui Centenar, Presedinția Consiliului UE în 2019, candidatură României la ONU și OCDE-jaloanele esențiale în următorii ani,” *Calea Europeana*, 29 August 2017. Accessed at <https://www.caleaeuropeana.ro/teodor-Melescanu-pregatirea-marelui-centenar-presedinția-consiliului-ue-in-2019-candidatură-româniei-la-onu-si-ocde-jaloanele-esențiale-in-următorii-ani/>

¹⁰ Taken from “Iohannis: Regret că proiectele dedicate Centenarului se pregătesc în lipsa unui cadru legal,” *Digi 24*. Accessed at <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/iohannis-regret-ca-proiectele-dedicat-centenarului-se-pregatesc-in-lipsa-unui-cadru-legal-895874>

¹¹ Ludovic Orban Comunicat, 9 October 2018. Accessed at <https://www.agerpres.ro/politica/2018/10/09/orban-somam-guvernul-sa-foloseasca-banii-europeni-alocati-pentru-autostrazi--189880>

¹² Ecaterina Andronescu Open Letter, 14 August 2018. Accessed at <https://www.mediafax.ro/politic/breaking-ecaterina-andronescu-cere-retragerea-lui-liviu-dragnea-de-la-sefia-psd-17421208>

¹³ “Percepția Românilor despre Centenarul Marii Uniri; Octombrie-Noiembrie 2017,” *Secretariatul General al Guvernului* (2017).

¹⁴ “Barometrul de Consum Cultural 2017,” *Institutul National pentru Cercetare și Formare Culturală*. Accessed at http://www.culturadata.ro/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/2018_Barometrul_de_consum_cultural_web.pdf.

¹⁵ See Daniel Brett, “There were huge protests in Romania – but what happens next?” *Washington Post*, 21 August 2018. Accessed at https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/08/21/there-were-huge-protests-in-romania-but-what-happens-next/?utm_term=.7caef2801b13

¹⁶ “Sa spunem DA familiei binecuvantate de Dumnezeu!-Apelul ABN pentru participarea la referendum,” *Basilica*, 29 September 2018. Accessed at <http://basilica.ro/sa-spunem-da-familiei-binecuvantate-de-dumnezeu-apelul-adunarii-nationale-bisericesci-pentru-participarea-la-referendum-in-6-7-octombrie-2018/>