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**HOW TO BE HAPPY IN ROMANIA — FACETS OF**  
**ROMANIANNES**

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*Abstract*

The paper was inspired by a collection of essays by 17 Romanian and foreign authors, mainly philosophers and writers, each holding various views on Romania and analyzing the possibilities to attain happiness in the heterogeneous, contrast-prone, often alienating post-1989 society. In a synthesizing approach, deconstructing and analyzing the stereotypes in current use, revealing uncomfortable or flattering aspects of daily life in today's Romania, the aim of the paper is to single out the dimension of the multi-faceted concept of "happiness" in a society that has not yet found its way out of the tangled web of a tormented history, but is yet striving to reach its rightful place in the European context. The approach is based on imagological concepts such as "self", "other", "national character", "ethnotype", a.s.o..

**Keywords:** happiness; Romanianness; stereotype; mental construct; imagology;

**1. INTRODUCTION**

The present paper was occasioned by the recent publication of a collection of 17 essays by Romanian and foreign authors on the topic of achieving happiness in Romania, a territory with a tormented history, constantly targeted by the surrounding empires throughout its history, bravely fighting to preserve its role as a "Latinity island in a Slavic sea", proudly claiming its rightful place in the European Union, and permanently struggling against its "minor culture" status. The premise that most of the authors (writers, journalists, philosophers) start from is that happiness is a matter of perspective, to be considered through the lens of the "Mioritic soul" (Lovatt, 1999, 3), being closely linked to the features of the Romanian ethnotype.

According to the preface written by Oana Bârna (2017, 6), who states that the 17 essays "form together an irregular polyhedron: each facet reflects a way of living happiness in the midst of unhappiness". One of the contributors, the writer Ioana Pârvolescu prefers to focus on the fact that "[Romanians] are apparently ready for anything, except happiness [...] in our world people pay large amounts to be insured in case of fire, floods or accidents, but in case of happiness they are left uncovered" (id., 41). Another contributor, Niculescu, who has lived a longtime in London and thus may regard

Romanians and happiness from a double standpoint (inclusive, and extraneous) at the same time, opines that “ [...] if you survive all the collective and individual unhappinesses and you are neither jaded, nor revolted, angry, apathetic, then you may say that you are a happy individual in Romania. Only, as someone once said, a happy individual in an unhappy world is more unhappy than that unhappy world” (id., 59). From a similarly double perspective, the insider turned foreigner by marrying a British citizen and settling in England, Rosser Macarie uses the same dichotomic approach : “How to be happy in Romania? Simple: by turning your back to being unhappy in Romania” (id., 138).

This perpetual oscillation between the absolute poles of the happiness scale, without any intermediary grey nuances to consider, seems to be a constant in the Romanian approach to happiness. Therefore, one may not but wonder whether Romanians as an ethnotype have certain peculiarities that render them more inclined to feel and perceive happiness in their own special manner.

## 2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Clearly, in the light of the recent developments in geopolitics and the animated European and global context, largely affected by migration and conflicts, the notion of ethnotype and its influence on the possibility of achieving happiness in the geographical space and the socio-economic circumstances assigned to a particular ethnic group have started to gather interest among researchers of all types, from psychologists and sociologists, to culture analysts and linguists alike.

Happiness has always been quite an elusive concept, difficult to define and therefore resisting research. Subjective par excellence, the researcher’s task becomes even more complicated when it is applied to the scale of a whole nation, bringing in considerations regarding ethnicity and national identity. Despite its declared empirical character, the present paper attempts to find the various facets specific to happiness in a Romanian context, i.e. in relation to the traits pertaining to national identity and ethnicity, in the light of the concepts proposed by imagology.

## 3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study aims to examine the components of two extremely difficult concepts resistant to analytical description, i.e. Romanianness and happiness in the light of imagological constructs like Ethnicity, or rather Ethnotype (the representation of national character), Self vs. Other (auto-image vs. Hetero-image), as well as all the surrounding stereotypes. The material to be analyzed is Gabriel Liiceanu’s text, entitled *The Paradoxical Equation of Romanian Happiness [Ecuatia paradoxală a fericirii românești]* (2017, 20-31), as the opening essay in the previously mentioned collection written by a proeminent contemporary philosopher currently living in Romania. Approached from an insider’s perspective, his contribution might shed some light on how present-day Romanians construe and perceive happiness.

Thus, the main questions driving this particular piece of research are:

- What are the main characteristics of Romanianness?
- How do they relate to happiness in Liiceanu’s vision?
- What are the possible imagological explanations for this view on happiness?

## 4. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

In trying to provide answers to the research questions above, our attempt aims at highlighting a possible connection between what identifies us as Romanians, as an ethnotype, the sum of everything that constitutes our “Romanianness”, and the happiness degree we experience as a people. The key constructs that are made use of, Romanianness and happiness, both extremely hard to define, are tackled from the perspective of the hypothesis that “everybody experiences happiness in their own way”, and therefore, there may be a detectable link between being Romanian and being able to perceive happiness in a special, uncommon, unique manner. The two constructs, however distant they may seem at first sight, may be seen in correlation by means of imagological concepts.

## 5. RESEARCH METHODS

### 5.1. Research Design

As the present study is an empirical, non-experimental study, it is mostly based on specialized literature review, with a special focus on imagological research, which forms the bulk of the references used. Imagology, which has been around since the 60s, seems to be most suitable in the context of the present paper, as, according to Leerssen (2016, 19), “ [...] imagology is a working method, not in sociology, but in the humanities; the aim is to understand not a society and social dynamics, but rather a discursive logic and a representational set of cultural and poetic conventions”.

This study is also descriptive and based on observation and analytical deconstruction, trying to uncover the characteristics of Romanianness and if and how they affect the happiness of the inhabitants of Romania, according to Liiceanu.

### 5.2. Research constructs

The most relevant constructs chosen for the present study belong to the field of imagology, an interdisciplinary field par excellence, which may provide helpful insights into the manner in which happiness is perceived in Romania. Starting from the multi-dimensional analytical model (Hofstede et al., 2002, 39), a people’s cultural identity may be construed on the basis of the following poles of multiple axes:

- Power distance;
- Collectivism/individualism;
- Femininity/masculinity;
- Uncertainty avoidance index;
- Long-term/short-term orientation towards time and traditions;
- Indulgence/restraint.

In this general theoretical background, the all-embracing notion of Ethnotype, the representation of national character, as seen by Leerssen (2016,16-118 passim) invokes Self-Other oppositions, focuses on the exceptional and the difference, “single[s] out a nation from the rest of humanity by ascribing a particular character to it, i.e. a temperamental or psychological predisposition motivating and explaining a specific behavioral profile” (17), in constant change according to historical circumstances, and prone to valorization.

## 6. FINDINGS

According to research in the field (Hofstede-Insights, n.d.), when applying the imagological grid to the Romanian ethnotype, the following characteristics of Romanianness seem to become salient:

- Romanians tend to favour high power distance, i.e. they are generally deferential to superiors and readily accept that power is not equally divided among the members of a certain community; when compared to the Western nations, the power distance index is high, as Romanians view superiors as benevolent autocrats and tend to be told what to do in the workplace rather than take initiative and stand out among other employees.
- As far as the collectivism/ individualism scale dimension is concerned, Romania is considered as a collectivist type of society, where family or group values reign supreme and loyalty to the community of origin trumps all. However, there is room for a more nuanced approach in this regard; the bumpy transition from the Communist dictatorship to the more liberal and capitalism-prone post-1989 society seems to have created a clear-cut gap between the older generations, who have lived most of their life under totalitarianism and were forced to embrace collectivism as a means of oppression, and the more distinctly individualistic, independent younger generations, especially the so-called Millennials.
- Romania is seen as a moderately feminine society, i.e. the motivation behind people’s actions is liking what they do rather than being the best at what they do; success in life is defined in terms of quality of life and not status; negotiation is favoured over conflict.

However, historical pressure and the turn of the millennium has also been at work in this respect, slowly starting to increase the masculine dimension of the country — status has begun to be rather ostentatiously displayed (huge house, powerful, noisy car preference for overtly branded products, etc). In addition, the arrival of important Western corporations that have opened branches on Romanian territory have also brought along the masculine-type organisational culture, stating that success means achieving the highest possible position in the corporate hierarchy, and standing out is better than blending in.

- The issue of avoiding uncertainty, or in other words the attitude about the future (i.e. can it be controlled or not?) and the approach to unknown, potentially threatening situations, reveals that Romanians score high in this area, being thus highly motivated by security and stability, often resisting change and innovation, having an intrinsic need for rules and regulations (even if paradoxically they seem not to be very thoroughly observed) and constantly keeping busy as a means of subduing anxiety. The political and economic instability in recent years has led to the reinforcement of these characteristics, making many Romanians insecure about their future and increasing the levels of emigration as a means of creating financial certainty.
- In Hofstede's terms, orientation describes "how every society has to maintain some links with its own past while dealing with the challenges of the present and future". Romanians seem to be placed in the middle of the scale between short and long-term orientation, with a slight preference for the latter. In layman's terms, that means that the typical Romanian is somehow torn between revering time-honoured traditions and turning to more pragmatic modern values (e.g. saving money, focus on education as a means to be prepared for the future and land a better job, etc).
- In point of indulgence, viz. the degree of impulse control, Romanians place high value on restraint, which apparently makes them prone to cynicism and pessimism, viewing desire gratification as somewhat wrong. This particular approach is most likely closely linked to the powerful influence that the Christian Orthodox church has in our country, reinforcing the religious notions of "resistance to the sin of self-indulgence" and "refusal to be led into temptation".

Interestingly enough, these polar dimensions of Romanianness tally in with the more psychologically oriented approach proposed by David (2015), who considers the following as the eight prototypical features of the Romanian ethnotype:

- a) Family is at the core of everything; family needs support, and offers support;
- b) Patriotism and hatred for Romania somehow go hand in hand;
- c) A 'love-and-hate' relationship with foreigners;
- d) Spirituality goes deeper than you imagine;
- e) Conflict avoiders, but loving conflict;
- f) A lot of passion, warmth & friendship
- g) A bit of victimization and fear of conspiracies;
- h) Creativity and outside the box thinking.

It is easily noticeable that some of the features overlap with and reinforce Hofstede's dimensions— a) and f) clearly support the feminine dimension, d) strengthens the restraint inclined culture, g) fits with uncertainty avoidance, etc. However, what is striking is the ever-present duality and paradoxical oscillation between extremes: love/hatred, patriotism/ bashing one's country, conflict avoidance/ conflict promotion, etc. This perpetual pendulation is intuitively perceived as an intrinsic obstacle to achieving happiness, as it opposes the very core of the feeling.

In addition, Sibii (2011, 16) proposes a quite intriguing view of Romanianness as made up of self-stereotypes: "Romanianness is to be found in stereotypes and, more precisely, in self-stereotypes. While devoid of a history per se, such self-stereotypes do have an identifiable trajectory: they are predicated on certain mental images, on certain prototypes (i.e., characters that metonymically stand in for wider

categories). The Romanian self-stereotype, therefore, cannot be traced back to an origin, but it can be studied in terms of its constitutive images". Thus, the researcher focuses on certain facets of the Romanian self-stereotype, i.e. the Byzantine, Orthodox, and Balkan components. The Byzantine influence is embodied by the stereotyped decadent, rotten Eastern roots of the Romanian people, a source of endless derision and contempt in Cioran's writings. It seems that the inheritance of Byzantium to be found in present-day Romanianness is adaptability, creativity, as well as a total lack of moral principles. The orthodox component is even more interesting, as it is intertwined with the Balkan character defining the nation, thus giving birth to the famous Homo Balkanicus:

"With the Romanian perception of Byzantinism and Orthodoxism, therefore, we have the beginnings of the stereotypical Homo Balkanicus: an individual who obeys his leaders (regardless of the source of legitimization for their authority), who perceives faith less as a vertical relationship with the Divinity than a horizontal relationship with his kindred, and who sees no reason to take moral responsibility for his wrongdoings. It is this skeleton that the Romanian perceptions of the Balkans further build on" (Sibii, 2011,19). In keeping with the same vein, the Orthodox church is seen as rather pertaining to the legal-political than the religious dimension, as it is a means of ensuring conformity, and not necessarily unity in faith; in Barbu's words (2004,107), "[...] Christianity, in its Eastern formula, does not appear, in the eyes of the Romanians, as a *belief* (a term presupposing personal fidelity), but rather as a 'law' (term involving submission in the public sphere). [...] to the Romanians, Christianity was above all the law given by the Roman emperors (*lex*), not a manner of worshipping a God (*religio*) or to show him faith (*fides*)" (our transl.)

In a nutshell, the stereotyped features to define Romanianness in these auto-image attempts of Balkanic inspiration are adaptability, immorality, duplicity, fatalism, laziness, a rather lax belief in God as an indiscriminate forgiver of all sinners, aggressiveness, scepticism, fondness for humour and [auto]irony. When comparing these self-stereotypes to the hetero-stereotypes according to Hofstede's imagological grid, it is easily noticeable that for the most part they match; the high power distance is visible in the fatalism and relation to God, the moderate long-term orientation is recognizable in laziness and adaptability, restraint is seen in scepticism and pessimism, and the high uncertainty avoidance tallies in with duplicity and immorality. The only obvious mismatch is the aggressiveness that Sibii considers as a typical trait of Homo Balkanicus, a typically masculine trait, which contradicts the statistics that place our country among the more feminine ones; however, the paradoxical nature of Romanians is at work even here, as conflict, as previously mentioned, is both shunned and loved.

In the light of all these ideas, the notion of happiness, simply defined as both a "state of mind, and a life that goes well for the person leading it" (Happiness, 2011) might prove hard to attain in the present-day Romanian context. According to the contemporary philosopher, researcher, writer Gabriel Liiceanu, considered as the main disciple of Constantin Noica, and one of the most important "hermeneutical voices" of today, Romanians as an ethnotype have the vocation of unhappiness. He opines that "any Romanian, living the drama of insignificance, can only be unhappy", being part of a "people raised with the habitude of unhappiness", in a space that is "historically consecrated to unhappiness", and where "the future is being periodically stolen from us and no dream seems allowed" (21). The excerpt may be interpreted in the light of two imagological constructs: first and most importantly, long term orientation, apparent in depicting the gloomy, uncertain, unstable future ahead, and second, power distance, which makes Romanians not stand out and take initiative, in a quiet acceptance of their fatefully predestined role in this part of Europe. The idea of an unfair history, full of obstacles that have contributed to the present "historical slough" (22) poses the problem of happiness as the sense of accomplishment deriving from withstanding the hostility of the world, and standing tall in the "suffering of the insignificant [people]" (ibid.). The issue of collectivism vs. individualism underlies the entire argument, as in Liiceanu's opinion, it is hard to equate personal/ individual happiness and the happiness of a people as a whole. In keeping with the less than auspicious social and political events of the present, he appears however to consider that at community level, happiness is directly linked to good governance, one of the nine indicators officially used to describe the gross national happiness index (Gross National Index, n.d., 2).

The inherent limitations of a predestined geopolitical and historical context in Eastern Europe are adequately embodied in the dichotomy he discusses, Happiness and prison, by bringing forward two

notable cases: the Noica case and the Steinhardt case. The former, revolving around the tragic destiny of the great thinker Constantin Noica, who spent most of his life in communist prisons and never got to be acknowledged as the great philosophical mind that he was in his lifetime, introduces the idea of the paradoxical spiritual liberation provided by confinement in prison, seen here as the embodiment of “apriori closed spaces”, the mythical Scylla and Charybdis, or any other physical, material obstacle that can only be surpassed by a “spiritual detour” (25). Imagologically speaking, such a paradoxical situation may be explained by the high values assigned to constructs like individualism, femininity, long-term orientation, as well as low values assigned to indulgence. The escape proposed by Noica is typically cultural in nature, of the purest Western extraction, i.e. the “paradise of culture”, the treasures of the spirit amassed along centuries, the emergency exit into a “miraculous and enchanted realm” where the “terror of history” (26) could not reach. Salvation through spirit and culture accedes to the level of a genuine mystique, delivering the individual from the miserable reality, and making the hidden beauty of culture available to the individual. In this case, spirituality is the perfect illustration of the specific trait of the Romanian ethnotype, as previously mentioned.

In Nicolae Steinhardt’s case, managing to be happy in the midst of “prison, suffering and death” (27) is even more overtly related to the human being’s ability to rise above the pain and hardship in all their forms and to find happiness in the fighting spirit and resilience in the face of adversity.

The conclusion of the essay is typically intellectualist, exalting the power of “the Book” as a “spiritual body” hiding the “mystery of the spirit in the abyss” (29), and providing the definition of happiness as “the convergence towards splendour” (31). However, pessimism is still pervasive in the final lines of the essay, which qualifies the happiness thus defined as a “way to escape solitude and unhappiness” (ibid.).

It is quite obvious that the vision upon happiness is shaped by the religion-oriented conceptions of salvation and delivery from this miserable earthly existence by a superior spiritual entity. Since spirituality and restraint seem to be two key features of the Romanian ethnotype, it is no surprise that Liiceanu founds his view on these two constructs. Likewise, the permanent oscillation between the extremes on the axis of happiness is also a characteristic of the Romanian people; happiness cannot exist outside the comparison with unhappiness. It should be noted nevertheless that in point of long-term orientation, which epitomizes the very relation of the being with the past, present and future challenges, Romanians are quite moderate, situated in the middle of the axis; escapism seems as a general solution to all problems of the less than ideal existence.

## **7. CONCLUSIONS**

All in all, it is quite difficult to manage to concentrate all the aspects of Romanianness in one single coherent ethnotype, since representations may vary according to reference point and historical context. Despite the less flattering self-stereotypes of duplicity, immorality, scepticism, and laziness which originate in the Byzantine and Balkanic roots of the Romanian people, Romanians may also take pride in their innate creativity, adaptability, warmth, hospitability, and passionate nature. In any case most hetero-stereotypes seem to converge towards depicting Romanians as highly spiritual, and with a profoundly religious penchant which pervades all the areas of life and thus their view on happiness. In a context shaped by high power distance, high uncertainty avoidance and low indulgence, escapism and the refuge in the world of ideas appear to be the answer to the gloomy existence marked by the scourge of political oppression, poverty and instability. Liiceanu’s essay considers the two traits, i.e. spirituality and escapism, as essential in attaining happiness in Romania. In his opinion, happiness is the convergence towards splendour, the only means of negating solitude and unhappiness. The possible imagological explanations of this view may relate to the high power distance and uncertainty avoidance, as well as the low indulgence levels, characteristic of a deeply spiritual people with a “Mioritic soul”.

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