

BOOK REVIEW

LUCIAN BOIA, *ROMÂNII ȘI EUROPA*, BUCUREȘTI: HUMANITAS,
2020, 80 p.

Antonela Gyöngy*

Published Online: 2020-12-30

Published Print: 2020-12-30

Romania's diverse and often contradicting transformation within Europe is a common but still relevant topic discussed in the academic field. Although scientific research on Romania and Europe has become more accurate, the public view upon the same topic remains biased. What does Europe mean and how has the image of Europe changed over time? To what extent and in which areas has Romania become Europeanized and which opposing tendencies can be observed in society? The historian Lucian Boia deals with these questions in his recently published essay „Românii și Europa. O istorie surprinzătoare”. The publication of this book shows that „Europeanization”, as an increasing field in the academic investigation, goes, once again, beyond the mainstream political science debate about Europe and the European Union. Apparently, „Europeanization” is a concomitant phenomenon and an accompanying term to „integration”, which was extensively examined and publicly

* Antonela Gyöngy is lecturer at the Faculty of European Studies, Babeș-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca. She studied Journalism and European Studies, followed by doctoral studies in sociology. Her main research interests are cultural history, memory politics in Europe, visual culture, international relations.

Contact: gy_antonela@yahoo.com

discussed in the context of Romania's accession process to the EU. While „integration“ focuses on institutional cooperation between states and their interdependence at the European level, the rediscovered concept of “Europeanization” broadens the field of scientific investigation, including domestic, interstate, and transnational discourses and social practices labelled as „European“. It is, therefore, more appropriate to start from a constructivist perspective and emphasize or even critically evaluate social constructions of Europe and Europeanness. Considering Europe as a fixed unit, by which belonging can be normatively measured, could easily fall into a Eurocentric approach.¹ From a constructivist view, Europe can be ascribed different meanings, thus it changes its appearance according to socially constructed attributions of “Europeanness” prevalent in each historical context.

Lucian Boia's book might be only partially assigned to this approach. Even if the author traces different historical events, through which Romania has built a European identity, placing them in the South-Eastern European context, he ultimately relates them normatively to the Western societies.

It is, however, confirmed that the historian does not pretend to undertake a systematic analysis of the Europeanization process in Romania, but rather a selective presentation of different critical aspects of Europeanization, which he comments in an essayistic register.

With his essay, Lucian Boia is continuing his 2012 published and controversial discussed book „De ce este România altfel?“. ² In the short foreword, he intends to emphasize Romania's European pathway with its remarkable developments and turning points, by tracing – similar to „De ce este Romania altfel?“ – the exceptions and otherness, i.e. the Romanian exceptionalism. This approach was already controversial in connection with his earlier book, when critics argued that he selectively provided historical facts in line with his initial thesis. Moreover, he created a myth of

¹ Cf. Ulrike von Hirschhausen, Klaus Kiran Patel, „Europeanization in History: An Introduction“, in: Martin Conway; Klaus Kiran Patel (eds.), *Europeanization in the Twentieth Century. Historical Approaches*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan Transnational History Series, 2010, pp. 1-18.

² Lucian Boia, *De ce este România altfel?* București: Humanitas, 2nd added edition, 2013.

negative exceptionalism by attempting to deconstruct the current political myths.³ Boia seems to have put forward an uncomfortable thesis that has not been left unquestioned by the critics. This critical reaction materialized in a suggestively entitled anthology „De ce este România astfel?“, edited by Vintilă Mihăilescu.⁴ In this book, prominent scholars are analyzing issues such as the geopolitical situation, the way the Orthodox church is hindering modernization, the politicized and corrupt privatization process, the consequences of national communism, to justify Romania’s exceptionalism or non-exceptionalism.

Regarding Romania and Europe, Boia asks whether the willingness to adapt and the partly unquestioned, reckless receptivity of different cultural and political models has Europeanized Romania over time. The linguistic and cultural diversity, which emerged from the back and forth movement between Orient and Occident, mainly from the earlier changes of political and cultural directions, led to a variety of influences such as Slavic, Ottoman, Western European and even American to interfere in this region.

The adaptability thesis is recurrent in all nine chapters. On the one hand, cultural and linguistic framework, the mixture of external influences, the role of ethnic groups that shaped the urban landscape, and the option of state centralization are being analyzed. On the other hand, Boia draws on the current period with the so-called “Dragnea experiment”, which pointed to the political volatility and the authoritarian relapses in the society.

Over time, Romania has practised its ability to adapt to various cultural contexts and political situations, but despite its repeatedly demonstrated adaptability, society in Romania does not seem to be ready to comply with the norms and institutions imported from the West. According to Boia, Romania cannot reach the level of a society that trusts in rules, as long as opposing interpretations and tendencies often weaken these norms and rules.

³ See critical reviews in: Vintilă Mihăilescu (ed.), *De ce este România astfel? Avatarurile excepționalismului românesc*, Iași: Polirom, 2017.

⁴ Vintilă Mihăilescu (ed.), *De ce este România astfel? Avatarurile excepționalismului românesc*, Iași: Polirom, 2017.

Finally, it cannot be denied that while Boia's book does not bring a consistent contribution to the scientific community, it does provide enough incentives for debates and further academic research on Romania and Europe.

Bibliography

1. Boia, Lucian (2020), *Românii și Europa. O istorie surprinzătoare*, București: Humanitas.
2. Boia, Lucian (2013), *De ce este România altfel?*, București: Humanitas, 2nd added edition.
3. Hirschhausen, v. Ulrike; Patel, Klaus Kiran (2010), „Europeanization in History: An Introduction“, in: Conway, Martin; Patel, Kiran Klaus (eds.), *Europeanization in the Twentieth Century. Historical Approaches*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan Transnational History Series, 2010, pp. 1-18.
4. Mihăilescu, Vintilă (ed.) (2017), *De ce este România astfel?* Iași: Polirom.