

## **Since Trajan and Decebalus: Online Media Reporting of the 2010 GayFest in Bucharest**

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## Since Trajan and Decebalus: Online Media Reporting of the 2010 GayFest in Bucharest

The current study uses critical discourse analysis to examine how a high profile gay pride event in Romania, the annual Bucharest GayFest, is represented by online media outlets. Same-gender relationships were only decriminalised in Romania a decade ago, and research on Romanian sexualities is scarce. In order to examine the construction of homosexualities in Romania, we employed critical discourse analysis on 23 Internet news reports of a gay pride event. Three major themes emerged: the GayFest as exotic, the GayFest as a political event, and the link between sexuality and national identity. Both exoticising and politicising discourses contribute to the positioning of gay people outside the nation. Pro-gay voices complement this marginalising perspective by reproducing political discourse. Only one statement in the news reports could be read against minoritising discourses: an ironic banner construed the trope of founding fathers (Trajan and Decebalus, in the case of Romania) as a potentially homoerotic motif, and thus undermined the relationship between nationalism and homophobia. The implications of these findings are discussed; the link of nationalism to homophobia and the almost unquestioned marginalisation of gay people are especially scrutinised.

**Keywords:** Gay Culture; Homophobia; Nationalism; Romania; Gay Pride; Media Representation

### Romanian Homosexualities<sup>1</sup>: A Brief History

Efforts to study the diachronic evolution of gender and sexualities in Romania have been fragmented, which is not surprising for an Eastern European country (Bucur, 2008). In order to place contemporary homophobia in a wider context, one has to rely on few, mostly official sources. However, sexual liaisons between men have been reported (in brief) since the

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1 We use the term 'homosexualities' here to refer to romantic and sexual attraction, contact, and relationships between people who are perceived by others to be the same gender. This is not intended to be exclusive of bisexuality nor heterosexual-identified people who also have sex with people of the same gender. Additionally, although bisexual- and trans-identified people and 'allies' may attend GayFest, the event is usually construed as a 'gay' event rather than LGB or LGBT.

Middle Ages, and medieval sources unsurprisingly frown on these relationships (Mazilu, 2006). The Eastern Orthodox Church, law, and medicine in Romania have stated their disapproval of homosexuality, but their rejection is as laconic as it is unequivocal.

Laws concerning homosexuality have undergone considerable change over time. The first Romanian Penal Code (Parliament of Romania, 1865) was based on the French model and therefore it did not specifically prohibit same-gender sexual activity. Beginning in 1936, five special provisions were included for prosecuting ‘acts of sexual inversion’, particularly ‘if it leads to public scandal’ (Parliament of Romania, 1936, art. 431). The following political regimes have maintained this provision (esp. Great National Assembly, 1968, art. 200), which at times was strictly enforced (Olivotto, 2007). After the fall of the national-communist regime in 1989, ‘sexual rapports between persons of the same sex’ were still punishable by imprisonment, but Romanian and international gay rights organizations began to question this prohibition. In 1996, the law was changed to decriminalise homosexuality unless it led to ‘public scandal’ (Parliament of Romania, 1996, art. 1, no.81). In 2001, Article 200 of the Penal Code was finally abolished by an act of the Government (Government of Romania, 2001). At around the same time, anti-homophobia measures were drafted and voted into law (Government of Romania, 2000). Marriage, however, remains denied to same-gender couples in Romania, and anti-gay proposals, interpellations, and statements occasionally occur in Parliament (see, for example, the blog of a member of the Parliament discussed later in this paper). Legal changes were admittedly made for Romania to become eligible for EU membership, a fact often criticised by (nationalistic) media (Crețeanu & Coman, 1998).

Gay movements and communities in Romania have emerged relatively late. Although gay rights movements emerged in some other European countries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (e.g., Ulrichs’ ‘Uranist’ movement in Germany), no such group seems to have existed in Romania. There was a gay scene between the two World Wars, but it was most likely accessible only to

the upper classes and not visible to the rest of Romanian society (see Olivotto, 2007, for a journalistic inquiry). Unfortunately, little is documented about gay life in Romania before the 1990s. There were some underground gay groups during this time that were short-lived and under-resourced (Nicoar , 1995). After the fall of Communism in 1989, a few gay rights organisations began to operate in Romania, including Be An Angel Romania (BAAR) and ACCEPT. The latter developed and annually organises the GayFest in Bucharest.

A GayFest was attempted and abandoned in 2004, because organisers could not convince enough gay people to come out into the streets. GayFest then began in 2005, and events at the first three (2005, 2006, and 2007) have been examined in terms of violence and visibility (Woodcock, 2009). The first (2005) was only 30 minutes long and it was marred by Noua Dreapt [New Right] protesters throwing food and homemade explosives at the parade. In 2006, a New Right protest was sanctioned by Romanian courts to be held prior to GayFest and was performed by uniformed New Right members and Romanian Orthodox Church officials. Twenty Antifa (anti-fascist) counter-protesters were arrested after they took action against the New Right protesters and seized some of their banners. Police presence in 2007 took a dramatic turn. There were 300 police assigned to protect New Right protesters and 800 regular, military, and riot police surrounding GayFest and blocking both visual and physical engagement between GayFest on the inside and onlookers and New Right protesters on the outside. Woodcock (2009) discusses ‘preventing communication as the implementation of “tolerance”’ (p.17) in her analysis of the 2007 GayFest. Since 2006, there have been no reported violent incidents associated with GayFest or the New Right protests. We examine media reports of the 2010 GayFest, four years after the last reported violent incident at GayFest (2006).

## Research on Romanian Homosexualities

Most research on Romanian (homo)sexualities has been pursued within what Foucault (1976) calls ‘the repressive hypothesis’. Sexuality is constructed as inimical to a certain type of social order, which in return attempts to repress it. Such censorship is then either defended or criticised, depending on the ideology one professes. Scholars of Romanian sexualities have mostly examined either sexual behaviour in relation to AIDS, or societal attitudes towards homosexuality.

A series of large scale surveys in Romania have included questions on homosexuality. Respondents to these surveys have largely rejected the possibility of any contact with gay men and lesbians (INSOMAR, 2009). The exclusion of people on grounds of sexuality was related to other types of exclusion and to nationalistic and pro-totalitarian ideologies (Institute for Public Policies, 2003). Such survey results may be a powerful rhetorical tool, as funding for research and activism often depends on impressive statistics, the very existence of such survey questions positions homosexuality as a ‘controversial issue’.

Much of the research on Romanian non-heterosexual people has focused on HIV/AIDS. Homophobia often is construed as an ultimate cause of the AIDS epidemic. Although homophobia may lead some heterosexual people to believe they cannot contract HIV, hiding sexuality in the face of homophobia can lead to unsafe sex among gay men. For example, Longfield, Astatke, Smith, McPeak, and Ayers (2004) performed an ethnographic study of the sexual practices of men who have sex with men in the Balkans, tackling such issues as using the Internet to find sexual partners. They suggest a causal chain that leads from homophobia through hiding to unsafe sex.

## Nation and Nationalism in Romania

If nationalism is often seen as an exceptional, extreme ideology, Billig (1995) argues that nationalist extremism is continuous with what he calls *banal nationalism*: ethnic conflicts and violent movements draw on the discourses and practices that maintain nation-states on a day to day basis. A post-socialist country on the Black Sea, Romania emerged as a nation in the mid-19th century; Wallachia and Moldavia merged in 1859, and the resulting state progressed towards an independent constitutional monarchy. Bessarabia (now the the post-soviet Republic of Moldova) and Transylvania fused with Romania after the First World War. Romanian nationhood has often been defined through its latin roots, as Roman emperor Trajan and Dacian king Decebalus are regarded as founding fathers; through anti-imperialist struggles against the Habsburgs, the Ottomans, and Czarist and Soviet Russia; and through Romanians' selfless loyalty to Easter Christianity. (see e.g., Boia, 1997/2001).

Romania's 'Europeanness' has long been a tense and contradictory issue. Governments have been interested in their reputation in the West ever since the 18<sup>th</sup> century; Western models were typically followed superficially but enthusiastically. The notion of 'freedom,' for example, featured prominently in Enlightenment era political and scholarly texts, but it was rarely fathomed or applied to specific matters (Marino, 2005). Consequently, a classical dispute in Romanian cultural history debated whether 'forms without a background,' i.e., Western models, should be shunned; or 'simulation leads to stimulation,' i.e., the imitation of the West eventually inspires functional local models (see Marino, 1995/2005, for a critical discussion). More recently, post-socialist Romania has joined European Union, and anti-immigration sentiment in the West has often targeted Romanians (see e.g., Mogo , 2009).

Romania is inhabited by 88.6% ethnic Romanians; Hungarians (6.5%) and Roma (3.2%) are the largest ethnic minorities (according to the 2011 census; <http://www.recensamantromania.ro/>). Anti-Semitism was extremely widespread before and

during the Holocaust and is still common today (International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania, 2004). Since the fall of communism in 1989, two ethnic conflicts have been the most prominent. First, tensions between Romanians and Hungarians in Transylvania have led to a number of political crises and violent incidents, although the region has been peaceful most of the time and it prides itself on its diversity; therefore, these tensions have been aptly called an ‘undead question’<sup>2</sup> (Hupchick, 1995). Second, gypsies are widely marginalised, scapegoated, and dehumanised (Marcu, Lyons, & Hegarty, 2007; Tileag , 2007). These tensions lie, once again, on a complex history (Achim, 2004).

Similarly to other countries, the history of Romanian nationalism is strongly interwoven with the history of certain political movements. Before the Second World War, the so-called ‘legionnaire’ movement was strongly associated with anti-Semitism, although such views were widespread even among the enemies of the movement; and the legionnaires actually owed much of their popularity to the pre-existing pervasiveness of anti-Semitism (see Veiga, 1989/1993). Romanian communism was itself defined by nationalism (e.g., in the form of *protochronism*, the idea that one’s own nation pioneered every major achievement of humanity). Nationalism was at that time the ideological component of a broader aim towards economic independence within the Eastern Block, and it gave birth to a technical-intellectual elite that, after 1989, continued supporting nationalistic politics (Veiga, 1997).

## **The Marginalisation of Homosexualities: Theoretical Background**

‘[T]here is no necessarily common element among lesbians, except perhaps that [they] all know something about how homophobia works [...]’ (Butler, 1991, p. 17) Indeed, there has been an increasing consensus over the last decades that ‘homosexual’ people are defined

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<sup>2</sup> Note the pun on the association of Transylvania with Dracula, the ‘undead’ vampire.

not as much by biological or psychological commonalities, as by widespread exclusion (Connell, 1995). On one hand, ‘sexual minorities’ have achieved (some of) the rights liberal democracies typically warrant to minorities (Herek, 2004); on the other hand, they have been *minoritised* (Sedgwick, 1990), i.e., positioned as a small, exceptional group. Positioning gay people as a minority creates a vicious cycle. An organized, self-conscious community can protest exclusion, but such organization also reinforces the idea that gay people are a ‘different’ group (see Foucault, 1976; Butler, 1991; and Bourdieu, 1998/2000, for three comparable accounts of this issue).

As sexualities have been reconstructed as social phenomena and specific movements were formed, homophobia has followed this trend. A so-called ‘modern homophobia’<sup>3</sup> (Raja & Stokes, 1996) has emerged, with a more sophisticated, political tone. Modern homophobia is facetiously accepting of homosexualities, but deplors the allegedly excessive attention granted to gay rights. Such findings consonate with those of discourse analysts, who have often found that some degree of ‘tolerance’ is stated only to make bigoted comments more acceptable (‘I am not homophobic, but...’; e.g., Gough, 2002).

Extant research on Romanian gay people relies on problematic theoretical and methodological assumptions. Surveys assume that homophobia can be captured by (dis)agreement with a standardised question (Bourdieu 1973), and the social functions of these opinions are ignored (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; 1988). Monteith, Deneen, and Tooman (1996) have shown that people who express anti-gay attitudes (but not people with pro-gay attitudes) change their answers to survey items according to whether they overhear a pro-gay or an anti-gay confederate. It is therefore necessary to explore *when* homophobia occurs, *how* it works, and *towards what end* – that is, to examine it from a discursive perspective. ‘[A]

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<sup>3</sup> We have chosen to focus on ‘[blatant] homophobia’ (Weinberg, 1972) and ‘modern homophobia’ (Raja & Stokes, 1998), because displays of these attitudes are prominent in the data, rather than more subtle forms of exclusion such as heterosexism (Herek, 1990; 2000).



much more powerful explanation can be given if the researcher looks at the organization of discourse in relation to function and context' (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 54).

The present paper aims to explore a particular instance of minoritisation: the construction of homosexualities in Romanian media reports of a gay pride event. Specifically, we focus on how the rhetorical tools used in these reports converge to minoritise gay people.

## Data and Analysis

'The analysis of prejudiced talk is a difficult challenge, partly because of the way it is interwoven into everyday talk.' (McKinlay & McVittie, 2008, p.149) News reports of a major gay pride event, however, are likely to be dense in supportive and/or prejudiced material. We have chosen to analyse Internet news articles that covered the 2010 GayFest in Bucharest in order to better understand how the Romanian media portrays gay people and gay issues.

Twenty-three articles were identified and archived by the authors. Table 1 lists the distribution of articles by source. In order to be included in the corpus, articles had to meet three criteria:

- (1) to have been published on one of the five most popular news websites in Romania (as ranked by the Romanian Press Audit, <http://www.sati.ro>);
- (2) to contain at least one of five keywords (The GayFest, LGBT, gay, homosexual, minorități sexuale [sexual minorities]);
- (3) to have been posted between 10 and the 30 May 2010 (i.e., the time the The GayFest, plus and minus one week).

-- Insert Table 1 here --

Internet news reports are an interesting analytic object for several reasons. First, Internet news articles are some of the most circulated texts in contemporary society. The sites

that have been included in the analysis were the most viewed news websites in Romania at the time of the 2010 The GayFest, and each of them had over one million readers. Second, news articles are written for a range of audiences, with different stakes related to each of them.

Journalists attempt to entertain readers, to maintain an image of impartiality and professionalism to their peers and to media-monitoring institutions, and to assure their employers of their loyalty and effectiveness. (See Fairclough, 1995, for an extensive discussion; and Reuters, 2012, for an example of professional guidelines for journalists.)

Several different discursive approaches have been effective in understanding prejudiced talk (McKinlay & McVittie, 2008). Nevertheless, the current analysis focuses on the worldview that is implicit in the text rather than on linguistic details. We therefore employ a critical discourse analysis approach that draws on the Foucauldian tradition. The central assumptions of this research are (1) that talk is organised around recurrent patterns, called discourses; (2) that discourses do not speak about pre-existing facts and objects, but they rather create them; and (3) that discourses have a key role in (re)producing the social order (cf. Foucault, 1969). We especially examine the ways in which oppression is manifested and maintained through media discourses. Our analyses therefore gravitate around what Young (1990) called the five faces of oppression: marginalization, violence, exclusion, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism.

The most prominent topics in our corpus are the Gay Pride Parade on 22 May, a protest organized by the New Right on the same day, and a series of pro- and anti-gay public statements in response to the GayFest. The news articles create their own (ostensibly objective) account of these events, whilst they also report commentaries from participants, bystanders, organisers, and police. Three major themes emerge from the analysis: the GayFest as exotic, the GayFest as a political event, and the link between sexuality and nationality. The voices that speak in these reports (i.e., the news writers and those on which they report)

ostensibly pursue different goals; however, all of these voices converge in construing gay people as a bizarre, foreign political group.

## **The GayFest as Exotic**

Despite the parade within the GayFest being named ‘the March of Diversity’ [‘Mar ul Diversit ții’], the issue of diversity is actually neglected in media reports. Rather than a celebration of everyday human diversity, the parade and its participants are constructed as especially exotic. Exoticism is probably the most persistent means by which these news reports attain commercial appeal. In his seminal analysis of media imagery, Barthes (1957/1972) lists exoticism among the ‘fixed, regulated, insistent figures’ (p. 150) employed to legitimise the social order. Exoticism places the ‘Other’ as outside readers’ own society (Ahmed, 2000; cf. orientalism, Said, 1978), and therefore it subtly legitimises an inequitable social order (Philips, 1999).

The march could not be without the exotic appearance of the transvestites who, apart from rainbow balloons and banners, gave colour to the scene.

[Nelipsite de la mar au fost aparițiile exotice ale travestiților care, pe lângă balona e și steaguri în culorile curcubeului, au colorat scena.]

(Hotnews, 22 May 2010)

By tradition, the ‘March of Diversity’ was a colourful one. Latex costumes, lips painted in loud colours, well-contoured eyes, balloons, and personalised banners.

[Prin tradiție, ‘Mar ul Diversit ții’ a fost unul plin de culoare. Costume de latex, buze pictate strident, ochi bine conturați, baloane și bannere personalizate.]

(tirile ProTV, 22 May 2010).

The two texts have an obviously similar structure: they first label the parade as ‘exotic’, and then they proceed to support their claim with examples. They both use the drag as an epitome of exoticism, particularly emphasising the vividness of colours and the abundance of accessories. Rather than simply describing the rainbow theme of the parade, they construe the participants as inseparable from the décor, since lips, eyes, and balloons equally contribute to a burlesque experience. ‘The Other becomes a pure object, a spectacle, a clown,’ (Barthes, 1957/1972, p. 152).

The beginnings of the two quotes are particularly interesting for at least two reasons. First, the eccentricity of gay people is not only stated, but it is also presented as habitual. Both texts emphasise from the outset that the parade is ‘always’ and ‘traditionally’ ‘colourful’. Second, such vague references to the past are the only ones that put the The GayFest into a historical context. Nothing is said about the history of sexualities in Romania; only the violent incidents at past parades are enumerated at the end of a few articles. This is what Barthes (1957/1972) aptly calls ‘privation of history’ (p. 151). Such a rhetorical device erases history, in spite of acknowledging a long past. Rather than tell the uneasy story of sexual stigma and persecution of gay people in Romania, the news reports suggest that gay people have always been strange. This approach strengthens exoticism: devoid of a wider context, a gay pride parade is even less intelligible.

## **The GayFest as Political**

The semblance of objectivity is pursued by the news reports with varied discursive resources. First, they reproduce what we will call an *event discourse*: both the The GayFest and the far-right protests against it are described in detail, with plentiful information on such issues as place, time, weather, cultural happenings and police interventions. Second, the vocabulary of political activism is employed: to protest, to march, to chant slogans, to display banners, to blame, to tolerate, controversial etc. Third, social scientific discourse is used:

results of opinion polls are sometimes reported, and terms like ‘homosexuality’ and ‘minority’ are used.

### ***Event Discourse***

Here is a typical report of the gay pride parade as a political event:

The The GayFest parade, in which approximately 200 people took part on Saturday, ended without any incidents, Mediafax informs. The participants, most of them colourfully clad, waved flags, balloons, T-shirts, and carried banners with different messages, pleading for the freedom of expression. Robin Barnett, the ambassador of Great Britain to Bucharest, was among their supporters.

[Parada GayFest la care au participat, sâmb t , aproximativ 200 de persoane s-a încheiat f r incidente, informeaz Mediafax. Participanții, majoritatea îmbr cați colorat, au fluturat steaguri, baloane, tricouri i au purtat bannere cu diverse mesaje, ei pledând pentru libertatea de exprimare. Printre susțin tori s-a num rat i ambasadorul Marii Britanii la Bucure ti, Robin Barnett.]

(Hotnews, 22 May 2010)

Considerable attention is given to contingent details, such as the time and the route of the parade. By citing a well-known media agency (Mediafax) and employing such political-journalism jargon as ‘incidents’, ‘supporter’, and ‘freedom of expression’, the news reports pursue an image of professionalism.

The assumption that GayFest would have incidents is implicit in the reporting of it as having occurred without incident, despite violence only occurring in 2005 and 2006 (Woodcock, 2009). It is *news* that there have been no incidents; the event is now over and the news is that readers can breathe a sigh of relief. Such discursive practices construe gay people as a political pressure group. They march, they chant slogans, they display banners, all in the name of political buzzwords (e.g., ‘freedom of expression’). They are ‘controversial’, and most people dislike them – or at least their gatherings. Moreover, they are a potential threat to

public order, as they need substantial attention from the police. As Woodcock (2009) remarks, ‘tolerance’ is implemented through preventing communication. The theme of incidents being expected is made even more explicit elsewhere:

Romanian civil and military police have been applauded towards the end of the GayFest Parade by the participants, who were grateful that, unlike elsewhere, the event in Bucharest went without incident. ‘I want to say that nowhere in the world is the Police more efficient than here in Bucharest. I have attended similar events worldwide, but nowhere things went better. Let’s applaud the police for this,’ declared Bishop Diane Fisher to those who participated in the march.

[Poli ia Român i Jandarmeria au fost aplaudate spre finalul Paradei GayFest de participan i, ace tia fiind recunosc tori c , spre deosebire de alte p r i, manifestarea din Bucure ti a decurs f r incidente. ‘Vreau s v spun c nic ieri în lume nu este Poli ia mai eficient ca aici, în Bucure ti. Am participat la manifest ri similare în întreaga lume, dar nic ieri nu au mers lucrurile mai bine. S aplaud m Poli ia pentru asta’, a declarat în fa a celor care au participat la mar episcopul Diane Fisher.]

(Gândul, 22 May 2010)

In this report, Diane Fisher (a bishop in the pro-gay religious organisation Metropolitan Community Churches) says not only that the GayFest is expected to have ‘incidents,’ but also that gay pride events worldwide are less peaceful than the one in Bucharest. The GayFest is positioned as exceptionally peaceful despite a New Right protest and the circulation of homophobic pamphlets. Political events are expected to have such incidents whilst festivals are not; gay visibility itself becomes politicised through the construction of the GayFest as a political event.

Construing gay people as a ‘classical middle-class single issue pressure group’ (Weeks, 1977, p. 171, cited in Connell, 1995, p. 216) has three important implications. First, it is contiguous with the more blatantly homophobic rhetoric directed against gay visibility. Second, gay organizations often reproduce this view themselves. Third, assimilating sexuality

with the political agenda of a well-circumscribed group is quintessential to minoritising (Sedgwick, 1990) gay people.

### *Political Discourse*

The news media often report (fragments of) declarations from those involved in the GayFest. In much of the pro-gay talk in the corpus, gay people are positioned as victims, willing to fight the injustice that has been and is being done to them. They seek the protection of a civilised West against a backward Romania that ‘needs more time and more wisdom’ (tirile Pro TV, 22 May 2010) Such a positioning is disquietingly parallel to that of anti-gay talk, which regards ‘fags’ as foreign and inimical to Romanian values (see the next section). They fight for their rights, but whether to tolerate them is still up to the (rather reluctant) majority.

‘... We are here to be able to gain equal rights, and the Embassy of Great Britain will be with you in this difficult fight’, Robin Barnett, the ambassador of Great Britain declared.

[... Ne aflăm aici ca să putem câștiga drepturi egale, iar Ambasada Marii Britanii va fi cu voi în această luptă dificilă’, a declarat ambasadorul Marii Britanii, Robin Barnett.]

(Realitatea, 23 May 2010)

Gay rights organizations often construe those whom they represent as a ‘sexual minority.’ This construction has some obvious advantages: contemporary governments often promise ‘minorities’ peaceful coexistence with the majority. Warner (1993) aptly calls this perspective ‘Rainbow Theory’ (p. ix). One might speculate that Warner's Rainbow Theory is not unlike Barthes' exoticism: the Other is tamed, and its Otherness becomes positive and entertaining rather than a potential threat with equal power.

Liberal political discourse is pivotal in pro-gay talk. The organisers of The GayFest and foreign embassies who support them often refer to human rights, democracy, freedom, and citizenship. Pursuing such values is described as a ‘fight’. needing courage and pride. A

sociological discourse is also employed, as gay people are referred to as ‘minority’ and ‘marginal’, and their problems as ‘discrimination’. By constructing gay people as marginal, they become minoritised by those in power, the ‘majority’. By minoritising setting people apart as a cohesive group, an ubiquitous issue (such as nationality or sexuality) is made invisible by making it a ‘minority issue’ that by definition only concerns a relatively small group (see also Ansara & Hegarty, 2012, on *cisgenderism*, an ideology in which ‘trans’ people are constructed as a distinct class of person). The construction of groups of people as marginal may also affect whether formal legislation is put into practice (see, for example, Young, 1990, on formal equality versus actual practice).

### ***Social-Science Discourse***

Apart from event-related details and quotes from speeches, news reports also pursue objectivity through social scientific terms and themes. In the following extract, one of the organisers of the GayFest employs the same means to produce pro-gay talk.

‘One day I was approached by a group of people, in an establishment. Apart from insults, they also asked me, ‘How can you be in the mood for parades when the country is going through a crisis?’ The question may seem legitimate, but it is during crises that civil rights are threatened most often. And especially the civil rights of marginal minorities,’ Buhuceanu said.

[‘Am fost abordat zilele trecute de un grup de oameni, într-un local. Pe lângă insulte, mi-au adresat și întrebarea: cum să vărd de parade când țara e în criză ? Întrebarea poate pare legitimă, însă tocmai pe timp de criză drepturile civile sunt cel mai adesea amenințate. Și mai ales drepturile civile ale minorităților marginale’, a spus Buhuceanu.]

(Gândul, 22 May 2010)

The extract offers an example of how sociological jargon is used to produce categories of people based on sexuality even by those whom they describe: those whose rights are



threatened are ‘marginal minorities’. The news reports often write about ‘sexual minorities’, and they sometimes cite the opinion polls that we discussed previously. However, the goals of the journalists and those gay rights organisations are obviously different. The former perform objectivity by using scientific jargon and statistics, whilst the latter claim minority rights for gay people. Just as the economic argument proves efficient in both contesting and defending the pride parade, sociological discourse also lends itself to different uses.

What is of particular interest in this quote (and other, similar comments) is the connection made between gay visibility and the current financial crisis. Talk against gay visibility usually relies on normalising analogies: there should be no gay parades because there are no straight parades, and gay people should follow the example of straight people in making their sexualities a non-issue. (The history of gay rights movements and homosexuality are conveniently ignored.) In this extract, however, the argument is taken one step further: the economic troubles of Romania should receive full attention, leaving no time or energy for gay rights. This is an excellent example of the minoritising perspective that underlies the whole content of our corpus: the troubles of the majority are more important than the needs of the minority. That gay rights get too much attention is a typical theme modern homophobic talk.

## **Sexuality, Nationality, and Anti-Gay Talk**

Participants came with national flags and banners with the insignia of the organisation. They chanted ‘we want normality, not diversity’, ‘gays in the street, whores in Parliament’, ‘Romanians are clean, not filthy homosexuals’, ‘Romania is not Sodom.’ The protesters also chanted ‘Bessarabia, Romanian land.’

[ Participanții au venit cu drapel național și steaguri cu însemnele organizației. Ei au scandat ‘vrem normalitate, nu diversitate’, ‘gay pe stradă, curve în Parlament’, românii sunt curățeni, nu homosexuali spurcăciuni’, ‘România nu-i Sodoma’. De asemenea, protestatarii au cântat ‘Basarabia, pământ românesc’.

(Realitatea, 22 May 2010)

The three discursive resources on which these slogans draw are obvious: religiosity, nationalism, and morality. Through the image of Sodom, religious scriptures are invoked against gay rights. (This has been a staple of homophobic discourse worldwide, and it will not be further analysed here.) However, religion and nationalism work together. ‘Romania is not Sodom’— that is, breaking religious norms positions one outside the nation. Religion has long been a defining aspect of nationality; see Chatterjee's (1986) discussion of Russian nationalism and Orthodoxy and Flora, Szilagyi, & Routometof's (2005) discussion of religion in Romanian national identity. Communist Romania was officially atheist, but the Romanian Orthodox Church gradually regained power in Romanian society. It was often seen as synonymous with anti-communist, anti-Russian, and anti-government activity, and with Romanian identity (Ediger, 2005). Through religiosity discourses, not only religion, but also heterosexuality, becomes essential for national identity. ‘Clean Romanians’ are contrasted to ‘filthy fags’, and the latter are to be deported to Barcelona<sup>4</sup> (according to a chant indirectly reported by the same news article). If gay people are the opposite of ‘pure’ Romanians, they are quite the same as the political establishment, ‘gays in the street, whores in Parliament’. If coexisting identities may be in conflict (see Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, for the concept of antagonism, pp. 122-7) <sup>5</sup>, nationalist discourse make one step further in suggesting that gay and Romanian identities are mutually exclusive. The discourses of order (religion, nation, moral cleanliness) are inextricably linked to those of violence, produced through anti-establishment messages and coarse language.

Although the New Right's call to deport gay people may seem ludicrous to outsiders, in 2003, 40% of Romanians believed that gay people should not be allowed to live in

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<sup>4</sup> Many Romanians do business in or holiday in Barcelona, as opposed to other ‘gay centres’ of Europe such as Amsterdam or Paris. Barcelona thus represents gay culture to Romanians as San Francisco does to Americans and Tel Aviv does to Israelis. Barcelona may also represent European influence and EU membership, of which nationalists across Europe are strongly critical.

<sup>5</sup> We are aware of the irony of this juxtaposition of nationalist and post-Marxist thought and wish only to credit the authors with a useful construct, not to engage in a nationalism-versus-communism debate.

Romania (Gallup, 2003, cited in Moraru, 2010). Blatant homophobia usually construes same-gender sexuality as a sin, a disease, and a crime. Religious discourse is of course essential to anti-gay slogans, which refer to sinning and Sodom. Mental health is only made an issue in a homophobic political blog post (not included in our corpus of online media reports), where ‘homosexuals’ are explicitly labelled as ‘sick’ and paired with such ‘perversions’ as necrophilia. HIV is not mentioned in the online news corpus, but it was mentioned in a leaflet of unclear origin that circulated around the time of GayFest 2010.

Other nationalistic issues and symbols were also invoked at the anti-gay march, such as Bessarabia (Moldova, which was lost as a territory to Russia), the Romanian national flag, and the image of interwar fascist leader Corneliu Zelea Codreanu. The GayFest is thus constructed as an embarrassment to the nation and part of a larger pattern of decadence and decay brought about by foreign entities and their sympathisers.

### **Beyond Politics: Queering the National Historical Narrative**

The discourses analysed above are reproduced with a disquieting consistency. We found virtually no breach in the vicious circle described above: pro-gay voices try to normalise homosexuality, paradoxically (but understandably) reproducing the very discourses that enable the exclusion of gay people by ostensibly neutral media and the far right. There was one sentence in the corpus that nevertheless departed from the general pattern. It is one of the slogans reportedly written on a pride-parade banner:

Gay ever since Trajan and Decebalus.

[Gay de la Traian și Decebal încoace.]

(Realitatea, 23 May 2010)

The banner nods to a popular joke; Romania is allegedly the ‘gayest’ nation because its founders were two men: Roman emperor Trajan and Dacian king Decebalus. In another version, all nations descend from Adam and Eve, but Romanians from Trajan and Decebalus.

The slogan (as well as the jokes on which it draws) is arguably an act of ‘queering’, in which ostensibly heteronormative constructs, values, and narratives are examined through a ‘queer’ lens. Although queering does not necessarily have to involve parody or satire, this is the approach that is taken with this slogan; parody and satire have been major strategies in resisting hegemonic values in a number of areas, including globalism (Miller, 2006), government power (Vieira, 1984), and commercialism (Christensen, 1993). First, the slogan parodies the main discursive resources employed by the homophobic protesters, namely nationalism, heterosexuality and – more indirectly – Christianity. Second, homophobic nationalism is read against itself, revealing possible homoerotic undertones in the historical narrative of founding fathers. Third, the joke relies on transgressing such boundaries as the one between patriarchal and homosexual social relations (see Sedgwick, 1990), and the one between gay politics and national histories. All of these sound in sympathy with Queer Theory’s taste for ‘parody and politics’ (Butler, 1990, p. 194).

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Although same-gender sexuality in Romania has been discussed since the Middle Ages, little is known about the people involved. Homosexuality (both sex and advocacy) was only criminalized in 1936 – and partially decriminalized in 1996 and fully in 2001 (Government of Romania, 2001). Only recently has scholarship of Romanian homosexualities been pursued, most notably as part of HIV/AIDS research (e.g., Longfield et al., 2004) and attitudes/prejudice research (e.g., Moraru, 2010). In contrast to these stereotypical main foci in Romanian homosexuality research, our analysis has examined how gay people and the

GayFest are represented in Romanian online news reports and, consequently, how heterosexual power is generated and maintained in Romanian media discourse.

Three major themes emerged from the analysis: GayFest as exotic, GayFest as a political event, and the link between sexuality and nationalism. Exoticism is unsurprising in the reporting of a street parade; however, journalists construed as exotic not only the GayFest, but also the people who attended. The exoticising of gay people feeds into their explicit exclusion as foreign, not 'pure' Romanians. It is also unsurprising that GayFest is positioned as a political event. Although GayFest is a festival, it is a *gay pride* and *gay rights* festival. However, the construction of gay people as a 'sexual minority,' despite its advantages in the human rights arena, was used to construct them as having concerns that only affect 'a few tens of people' (Hotnews, 23 May 2010). The third theme, however, reveals an important feature of the discourse around gay people in Romania, that nationalism – and national interests – are at odds with non-heterosexualities.

Anti-gay talk in the corpus mixes blatant and modern (Raja & Stokes, 1996) homophobia, and it relies on a plethora of discursive resources. Blatant homophobia is more characteristic of the banners of the New Right, while modern homophobia is present in other voices. However, the borders are blurred. Modern homophobia argues that non-heterosexual people and their problems receive too much attention, whilst carefully emphasising that the speaker is otherwise 'tolerant'. In the articles that were analysed in this study, modern homophobic talk rarely denies that it is prejudiced, and it mostly converges with blatant homophobia. The staple of Romanian modern homophobic talk is the irrelevance of gay issues: they matter to just 'a few tens' of people, not the majority; The GayFest is a waste of money – which is especially reproachable as Romania is going through an economic recession and Romanians 'struggle with poverty' (tirile ProTV, 22 May 2012).

Pro-gay talk in our corpus is always normalising, which has both costs and benefits. On one hand, they render gay issues intelligible and potentially acceptable, as they rely on mainstream discourses. On the other hand, such talk is often criticised for being too conciliatory, merely trying to fit gay people into current heteronormative schemes instead of promoting change (e.g., Clarke, 2002). Certain reporters and bystanders, for example, comment on the The GayFest as being part of a progress towards tolerance. The underlying logic of such statements is not much different from the organisers' discourse on fighting for democracy, but it overlooks gay people's agency. 'Tolerance' is treated not the effect of gay rights activism but as the result of some natural evolution in social mores. Real acceptance and equality are not at the end point, but rather tolerable coexistence. From a discursive point of view, 'prejudiced' and 'tolerant' talk have much in common. They are both essentialising; they regard 'minorities' as essentially different from the 'majority' (McKinlay & McVittie, 2008) – and consequently are both minoritising. They construct discrimination as a problem that only affects a very limited number of people rather than as a societal problem.

'Gay ever since Trajan and Decebalus' is the only statement that challenges minoritising views. Through queering the national historical narrative, the slogan transcends current politics and nationalist opponents to stake a claim on Romanian identity. Through this claim, it challenges the notion that gay people should not live in Romania and also one of the fundamental claims of nationalist homophobia, that gay people are somehow foreign and not real Romanians.

### ***Postscript***

Since we collected and analysed our data, much has been written in the Romanian media on homosexuality. Most recently, the Museum of the Romanian Peasant announced it would collaborate with gay rights organisation ACCEPT on an exhibition concerning gay

history. The involvement of a museum in this affair has occasioned numerous statements that confirm the link between nationalism and homophobia. In the meantime, *Sextures* published a special issue (volume 2, issue 2, June 2012) on *Parades of Pride or Shame: Documenting LGBTQ Visibility in Central and Eastern Europe*. The Weeks Centre for Social and Policy Research organised a conference on *Queer Sexualities, nationalism and racism in the new Europe* (London, October 2012), at which we presented the conclusions of this paper. The work of our colleagues from other post-socialist countries, as seen both in the special issue and at the conference, have also strengthened our trust in the results of this research.

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Table 1.

## Source Properties and Distribution of Articles.

Source	Readership	Primary Medium	URL	Articles (%)
Realitatea TV	1,719,463	Television	www.realitatea.ro	7(30.43)
tirile ProTV	1,507,493	Television	www.stirileprotv.ro	2(8.70)
Hotnews	1,328,811	Internet Only	www.hotnews.ro	5(21.74)
Adev rul	1,315,022	Daily Paper	www.adevarul.ro	6(26.09)
Gândul	1,204,249	Daily Paper	www.gandul.info	3(13.04)

Readership is defined as the number of unique IPs that accessed the site during May 2010.