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BOOK REVIEW

LAURENȚIU VLAD (COORD.), *PERCEPȚII ALE „EUROPEI" ȘI EUROPENITĂȚII ÎN SPAȚIUL PUBLIC ROMÂNESC AL SECOLELOR XVIII-XXI (ISTORII, IMAGINI, IDEI)*[1], IAȘI, INSTITUTUL EUROPEAN, 2024, 399 P.

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Introduction

In December 2024, I received an invitation to read and review a book volume that deals with an important, often overlooked topic in Romanian literature. This review will focus on the collective volume titled "Perceptions of "Europe" and Europeanness in the Romanian Public Space of the 18th – 21th Centuries", which was published in the same year under the coordination of Laurențiu Vlad. This review comes at a time of great tension for Romanian society for two reasons. Firstly, because the first round of the 2024 presidential elections was won by Călin Georgescu, an ultra-nationalist independent candidate, critic and opposer of the EU and NATO. Shortly after the results

[1] Perceptions of "Europe" and Europeanness in the Romanian Public Space of the 18th-21th Centuries (Histories, Images, Ideas)

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were announced, the Constitutional Court annulled the first round of elections based on reports from Romanian intelligence agencies suggesting Russian interference in the electoral process. The second reason is the 2025 re-run elections, where the final round sets the stage for a confrontation between an openly pro-EU candidate and another who views Romania-EU relations through a sovereign and Eurorealist lens.

First of all, it is important to mention that various authors from fields such as history or social sciences have researched and published works on the relationship between Romanian society and the Western world or the role of Europeanism in the construction of what we call Romania today. Although this topic is not new to both scholars and readers, I have noticed that most of the works are individual contributions in the form of memoirs, condensed books or research articles focussing on a particular period or topic. The novelty of this collective volume consists of the fact that it has succeeded in bringing together a number of 20 experts with different backgrounds and research interests, whose writings, linked together, present a chronological and well-defined history of the development of the Romanian state and its timid openness from the mid-1750s to our recent times, when we can speak of a Romania fully integrated into European structures.

A carousel of meanings for Europe

This section will analyse the four main parts of the book. I have chosen the word carousel because as a nation or entity, Romania was in a constant shifting motion. Since mid 1700s, Romania's relationship with the idea of Europe was in a rather dynamic, ever evolving and conflicting process.

The first part of the volume presents a Romanian region that was not yet united as a nation. We find an area consisting of three principalities, Wallachia, Transylvania and Moldavia, which were initially strongly influenced and dominated by the Ottoman Empire, the Phanariots and later by the Russian Empire. As mentioned by the contribution of Toader Nicoară, the interesting thing about this period is the infiltration of a Francophone culture, which

was adopted by the foreign rulers and later embraced by the Romanian elites and population. In this context, we should see Francophone culture as an informal understanding of what high values and social standards mean. This was expressed by learning the French language, owning French-language books and having children taught by French teachers. Language was not the only component, habits/manners also played an important role. These included the style of clothes, behaviour in public and the way people spoke. At the beginning of the 19th century, we witnessed a change in the mentality of Romanian noble families. Cornel Sigmirean notes their strong interest to send their children to universities in European countries such as Italy, Germany or Austria. We have several reports about these students and their perception and interaction with these cities and their social life, including everyday socialisation, events or academic meetings. The first part of the book contains more details and time periods, but for my review I have decided to focus on two aspects, namely the Romanians' turn towards a Francophone culture and the openness of noble families to send their children to study abroad. In my opinion, this shows a clear and irreversible path for Romanians, predetermined by a form of cultural and academic appropriation to the West.

The second part of the volume introduces the Romanian interwar period. This section analyse how Romanian intellectuals and politicians covered and expressed their perspectives on the idea of Europe in the interwar period. An article by Aura-Carmen Slate introduces a magazine titled „European Idea" which worked as a platform to familiarize the Romanian public with the latest news from Europe. The magazine brought together Romanian intellectuals who updated its public with news regarding developments from the League of Nations, or discussions on Max Weber and his theories. At times, the magazine would also publish articles criticizing current Romanian politics. In another contribution, Alina Stoica presents a magazine titled "Western Newspaper". Based in Oradea, it brought to its readers analyses regarding relations between states, cultural events across Europe

and even covered the early years of the Hitler era. Compared to the first magazine, the "Western Newspaper" came into existence as a need to bring a countermeasure against Hungarian propaganda in the Crișana and Maramureș, two historical regions still in tension after Great Union of 1918. Mihai Sebe brings us a political perspective, where he discusses the idea of European integration proposed by Iuliu Maniu, Prime Minister of Romania for three terms during 1928–1933. Maniu drew and proposed a plan resembling an ideal of European unification. His plan was to establish a "Central European Confederation" including countries such as Poland, Hungary, Austria, Greece or Czechoslovakia. I have chosen to talk about these two magazines and Iulius Maniu and his ideal of unification for one reason. Although the European interwar period was plagued by a fragile post-war economy, the rise of extremist movements and conflicts between states, the strategy of the Romanian intellectuals seemed to be focused on a soft top-down approach. This means that the intellectuals, through magazines or political agendas, tried to bring the Romanian public closer to the European realities of the time, while maintaining the idea of a unified Romania committed to the European struggle.

The third part discusses the years 1940-1980. Most contributions for this section focus on the communist period and the way the regime interprets the relationship between Romania and Europe. Although the communist regime did not refute the idea of anchoring Romania to European realities and history, this process happened under strict guidelines, narratives and with a strong sense of sovereignty. As we know from history classes, the concept of Dacianism was a narrative that helped the regime frame the question of Europeanness but without undermining its power. Communists embraced the idea that Dacians had played a major role in the ancient history, sometimes even framed as a culture that surpasses that of Ancient Rome. Although this narrative was exaggerated and had no scientific ground, it kept the idea that historically, Romania was part of a European culture but, with hinting towards a complex of superiority over other cultures. Mihaela Grancea exemplifies

how communists shaped their representation of the West through cinema. In the late 1970s, Western films were more watched than films produced by socialist countries in the East. As a countermeasure, the regime directed a series of movies that depicted the West in three manners. Through historical movies, the Romanian rulers were portrayed as loving their nation while foreign rulers attacked or did not care about Romanian Principalities. Through action and police movies, foreign spies would often entered Romania to steal state secrets, to take them to the West. And finally, through modern movies, which would show emigrants in the West deciding to move back to Romania because of a degrading lifestyle.

The last part of this volume describes the political situation in post-communist Romania. Although this section is short, in this part we are presented with a new, revitalised ideal for post-communist politicians, intellectuals and citizens. Ruxandra Ivan explains this ideal, often referred to as Euro-Atlantic integration, which is reflected in Romania's accession to the EU and NATO. Another contribution by Cristina-Maria Dogot highlights that extremists and strong nationalist actors were present in Romanian society in the 2000s, but failed to mobilise and create a stable base. They either ignored the accession process or were not against it, or they had a soft Eurosceptic component. Sergiu Mișcoiu, Sergiu Gherghina and Dragoș Samșudean contribute the last article of this book. Their article brings up the fact that almost two decades after European integration, parts of Romanian society have started to have different views on some of the EU's core values. Here we are presented with an interesting study on Romanian churches and priests who have strong views on the acceptance and status of sexual minorities.

A final thought on Romania and the new idea of Europe

As I write the final thoughts on this book review, Romania is only a few days away from electing a new president. One of the key takeaways from this book is that Romania in its modern era has followed a clear, yet

sometimes interrupted, path towards what some people would call the European family. In its history, Romania's path towards "Europe" was often interrupted either by a National Legionary regime or by the communist regime, but after the fall of communism in 1989, Romanian society had the opportunity to freely choose its direction. The previous regime under Nicolae Ceaușescu had seen the relationship with Europe as a struggle for national sovereignty, which was necessary for the preservation of the socialist ideal. However, as the last article in this book shows, parts of Romanian society have begun to question Romania's position in the EU. This means that new political actors have brought back the concept of sovereignty, but it has been reinterpreted to suit our modern realities. Modern so-called sovereigntists use this term to oppose the effects of globalisation, which manifests itself in the transfer or even loss of sovereignty of states to the detriment of a supranational entity, embodied by the European Union. Sovereignism is therefore presented as an instrument to combat globalisation, but also as a political position against the EU. This rhetoric became extremely popular during the now annulled round of the 2024 presidential elections and later during the re-run of the elections. The 2025 presidential elections should simply not be seen as another civic exercise in which citizens choose a new name, but rather as a test in which citizens, elites and politicians must choose between two perceptions of "Europe". One in which a sovereign rhetoric will isolate Romania and abandon an international order based on liberal rules, and another in which Romania might have the chance to finally contribute to and consolidate a regional liberal international order.