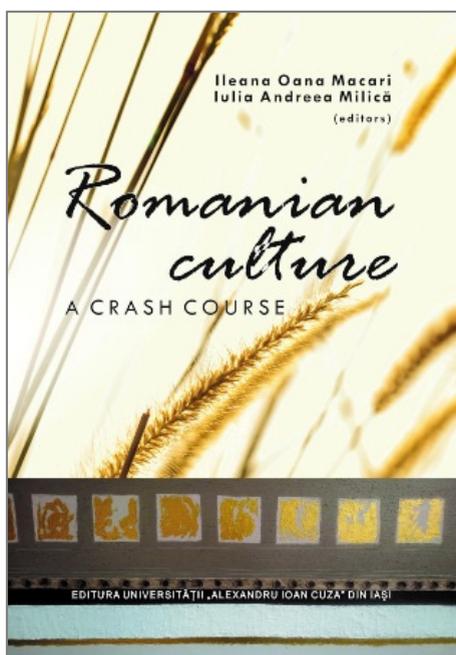


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Ileana Oana Macari, Iulia Andreea Milică (eds.), *Romanian Culture – A Crash Course / Cultura română – o prezentare succintă. Iași: Editura Universității "Alexandru Ioan Cuza", 2021, 205 p.*

In the light of the European intercultural language policies, as first reflected in *The Common European Framework for Languages* (2001), and the interest of Cultural Studies in the foreign-language teaching in the last decades, *Romanian Culture – A Crash Course*, edited by Ileana Oana Macari and Iulia Andreea Milică, is an initiative more than needed today in the field of Romanian as a second language, mostly because it targets an area that is insufficiently explored, that of culture study in second language acquisition, and also because it synthesizes the main topics that a course of such nature should include. The volume brings together researchers and teachers from various domains of interest, such as history, business administration, geography, philosophy, language teaching etc., not only in carrying out a well-documented insight into Romanian



culture, but also in showing that language and culture are two phenomena that cannot be separated.

When talking about the formation of the Romanian language, Alexandru Arnold Francisc Gafton, for instance, states that when communities “reach a certain stage of their cultural-intellectual and scientific development”, they “feel the need to develop a linguistic tool capable of fulfilling various demands related to

clear, accurate, nuanced and unequivocal conveyance of complex conceptual contents and, possibly, in refined aesthetic ways”. The same interdependence between culture – also understood as civilization in Gafton’s paper – and language is to be noted in Ana-Maria Ștefan’s chapter. Her approach is the converse to that of Gafton and she analyses the kinship network in Romania based on the messages that the proverbs convey: “the woodchip

doesn't bounce far from the trunk" [a chip off the old block] (*așchia nu sare departe de trunchi*) is an example of a proverb which talks not only about a nuclear family as understood in the past, but also about a contemporary Romanian society that Ștefan sees as being child-centered. "Blood doesn't turn into water" [blood is thicker than water] (*sângele apă nu se face*) is a proverb that not only informs the relevance of consanguinity as "the basis of the kinship network", but also talks about the equal relevance of paternal and maternal relatives both in the past and now: "like most of the Europeans, the Romanian have cognatic bilateral descent, which means that relatives on the father's and respectively mother's family sides are considered equally important to the individual, from a social and emotional point of view". One of the sociocultural consequences of *blood being thicker than water* is that when it comes to inheritance, there is a hierarchy given by the degree of kinship, and not by discrimination based on birth or gender.

There are two temporalities we must consider when it comes to the study of culture: on the one hand, the *new* and *now* of the present, as practiced by Cultural Studies, and on the other, the past and the history of a given society. When *The Common European Framework for Languages* (2001) states that language and skills in a second language are to be learned along with "the cultural context in which the language is set", it leaves out neither the present in motion, nor the self-contained past. With few exceptions, such as Lucian Bălanuță's final pages, that take into account the local media during the pandemic, Iulia Andreea Milică's exhaustive paper on culinary habits or Adrian Crupa's final remarks on Covid

and Romanian mentalities, *Romanian Culture – A Crash Course* prefers a chronological approach that goes deep into history rather than the contemporary manifestations of Romanian culture.

This is why we can see it as being complementary to the other (very) few cultural approaches to the study of Romanian, that are more into bringing basic cultural knowledge to an up-to-date linguistic and theoretical context. We mention here Anca Ursa and Nora Mărcean's paper in *Developing Intercultural Communication Competence in Foreign Students Attending Medical Schools in Romania*, Elena Platon's theoretical synthesis in *Româna ca limbă străină (RLS). Elemente de metadidactică [Romanian as a foreign language (RLS). Elements of metadidactic]* and the didactic texts written by Elena Platon, Cristina Gogăță, Lavinia-Iunia Vasiliu and Anca Ursa in *România în 50 de povești. Limba română ca limbă străină (RLS). Texte gradate A1-A2 [Romania in 50 stories. Romanian language as a foreign language (RLS). Leveled tests A1-A2]*. Deploying the focus from multiculturalism, that is restrictive, to interculturalism, much more inclined towards cultural relativity, Elena Platon carefully notes: "we deduce that suggesting to the student to carefully observe the other's culture should not only be done to improve his/her linguistic competence, by virtue of one language - one culture, but also to learn to communicate with cultural alterity" (*Româna ca limbă străină (RLS). Elemente de metadidactică*). Culture is then a means by which students get to know better both the others and themselves, while improving the linguistic skills. The purpose of cultural oriented language teaching is not to infuse the student with cultural facts and nuances of the language

acquired, but to help him discern the similarities and differences between the targeted language culture and other cultures, including one's own.

Romanian Culture – A Crash Course covers a wide area of topics, from the formation of Romanian language, pronunciation, consanguinity to arts, education system, culinary habits, tourism etc. and, when needed, it shows the relativity and vagueness of the term *culture*, by implying from time to time that almost everything we relate to ourselves and to our culture could be easily associated to other forms of co-habitation outside our familial and national circle. Iulia Andreea Milică sees Romanian gastronomy both regionally and historically – as dependent on flavours and dishes coming from empires that exercised a political and economic influence over the Romanian regions throughout history – and in a more general framework of a unifying category, that can be read as a cultural attitude: "Romanian food is less spicy than other international variants and Romanian[s] tend to diminish [decrease] the quantity of exotic, hot spices even from international dishes. However, this [does] not mean that the traditional dishes are unsavory, since Romanian[s] prefer spices carefully selected for various types of food".

Overall, the collection is more interested in knowledge, that is historical, than in cultural attitudes that the inhabitants of Romania manifest in relation to the various topics covered by the papers. The volume is opened by Roxana-Gabriela Curcă's synthesis of the origins of Romania and the Romanians, that covers the timeline from the 1st century BC to the modern age. Roxana Vieru begins her paper on forms of writing with some tablets

dated c. 5300 BC and found in Tărtăria, Romania and moves along throughout the centuries, until present times, when "we broadly write as we pronounce in Romanian". Adrian Crupa talks about a topic often avoided in second language pluricultural classes, that is religion. He connects the diffuse concept of mentality to that of religion, with insights into a *now* and *then* built – as the volume overall – on the basis of Communism.

Despite the editors' intent to address the collection mainly at "the international community of our university, that is the Erasmus students, the foreign lecturers, and the Visiting Professors or other foreign guests", we think that the collection could be used at maximum potential as an instrument by teachers of Romanian as a second language. The collection provides not only a vast array of topics and multiple perspectives given in an interdisciplinary approach, but also many facts, data and sociolinguistic aspects that would offer a large corpus for any teacher interested in elaborating courses that would improve the students' both cultural and intercultural competencies.

Although it confirms the main function of a crash course, by providing considerable information about Romanian culture in two hundred pages, the collection provides knowledge that should be paired with both cultural attitudes of the present and more intercultural references in order for it to be usable as a handbook in specialized training in second language culture. The intercultural skills needed for a student to deal with cultural aspects are to be developed not only in relation to the knowledge acquired through a well-documented volume as *Romanian Culture – A Crash Course*,

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but in a broader framework, where texts such as those found in *România în 50 de povești. Limba română ca limbă străină (RLS). Teste gradate A1-A2 [Romania in 50 stories. Romanian language as a foreign language (RLS). Leveled tests A1-A2]* are to be put in relation to the historical

knowledge provided by the collection edited by Ileana Oana Macari and Iulia Andreea Milică in order to raise the cultural awareness of the student by means of all four basic activities according to *CECR*: speaking, listening, reading and writing.

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