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Old People in Romanian New Media: from Undermined Identities to Social Death. A Case Study

Adriana TEODORESCU¹, Dan CHIRIBUCA²

Abstract

With a qualitative methodology and an interdisciplinary approach, this paper focuses on the most prominent public narratives related to elders and old age produced in the context of the January-February 2017 collective manifestations against the attempts of Romanian government to decriminalise corruption, manifestations where old people were believed to play a negative role. The study highlights the thanatic imagery which infuses the attitudes towards ageing and old age and intensifies the negative stereotypes of old people. The findings show that, starting from the use of the social syntax of war, the diverse identities of Romanian elders are totally ignored in these narratives, while a general, narrow identity is constructed through horizontal and vertical generalization, through replacing positive stereotypes of old age with negative ones and through transforming the elders into a radical Otherness. Undermining elders' social identities was discussed as an element of affecting their social inclusion and increasing the risk of condemning them to social death. Also it was observed and examined the existence of three major thanatic metaphors: the toothless mouth, the bowed head and living on borrowed time.

Keywords: elders, old age, public narratives, undermined identities, thanatic metaphors, social death.

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Introduction and premises

There are two main premises which define the foundation and framework of this study. The first one is related to the fact that elderly people remain, in various ways, a vulnerable social category in the entire Western world, from what is called *ageism* (Bower, 2011: 32-60; Gullette, 2017) to facing specific difficult economic or medical situations (Clarke, 2011; Lehaci *et al.*, 2016). The second one is the assumption that public narratives concerning old people – or any other *vulnerable* subject (Irigaray, 2002) – are never neutral, especially when they emerge in time of macro or micro-social crisis. A crisis like this took place in Romania, at the beginning of 2017, when public manifestations against the attempts of Romanian government to decriminalise corruption triggered a considerable number of reactions within the public space. The internet hosted many articles written by public figures and quasi-unknown bloggers, texts which along with all the comments they engendered, had in common a focus on old people as a significant actual and symbolic player in this crisis.

These texts' contents depict and reflect a thanatic collective imagery usually absent in media and public narratives related to the elderly and are especially relevant for understanding the core, real attitudes towards old age and old people as the conflictual climate activated by public manifestations has blurred and eroded the social and political correctness normally regulating the social representations of the elderly.

The social inclusion of the elderly is one of the main goals of the *National strategy on social inclusion and poverty reduction*³ and the negativity of the old age and elderly representations in public narratives is important to be analysed and understood because it seems to indicate a cleavage between the public attitudes and official policies. Without a real knowledge and good understanding of the values and social representations attributed to the old age and elderly by Romanian public opinion and social influencers it would be very difficult “to ensure that the elderly are valued and respected, that they remain independent and can participate in all aspects of life as active citizens, and that they enjoy a high quality of life in a safe community” (NSSI, 2015:11).

The methodology of the study is qualitative – mainly semiotic content-analysis – and the approach is interdisciplinary, resorting to concepts or theories from sociology, gerontology or death studies.

³ The document was elaborated by the Romanian Ministry of Labor, Family, Social Protection, and Elderly, with the collaboration of a group of experts from World Bank. It is approved by Romanian Government, together with the strategic Action Plan for 2015-2020.

Old age in Romania. A cultural background

What seems to characterise the public narratives of ageing and old age in nowadays Romania is the extreme polarization. On one hand, it can be noticed the existence of very positive narratives, emphasising traditional social roles of the elders, such as grandparenting, providing help for their families, being sources of wisdom (usually correlated with the idea of inner peace, with the acceptance of life as destiny). But on the other, negative narratives concerning both the representations of old people and the understanding of ageing seem to proliferate, while subtler, non-stereotypical narratives are lacking. There is a general consensus among Romanian scholars that negative narratives prevail over the others (CNPV, 2017; Gherman, 2014: 46; Craciun, 2012: 374). If this extreme polarization is not new (Hazaparu, 2011: 315), in the last years, most of the positive narratives tend to convey the idea not of how old people *are*, but of how they *should* be⁴, while, at the same time, the negative narratives are perceived as representative for what old age is⁵. Their pretence is that they reflect elderly people's reality as such. In other words, the positive narratives are nostalgic (they refer to the lost paradise of traditional ageing (CNPV, 2017:4) and normative (they prescribe codes of behaviour), while the negative narratives are aggressive and descriptive.

Romania is in line with the general Western tendencies of understanding old age, which, despite the growing number of old people engendered by the advances in medicine and the subsequent increase in life expectancy, remain pervasive (Cuddy *et al.*, 2005) and predominantly negative (Shotton, 2003; Kite *et al.*, 2005; Macia *et al.*, 2015: 407-408). However, there are several explanations that could account for its specific polarisation. First of all, the Romanian social imagery of ageing and old age continues to be shaped mainly by a long tradition according to which ageing is not negotiable in terms of personal meanings and social outlook. Growing old means getting closer to death. Thus, old age is mainly perceived as a meditative, passive age. Because of the fact that knowledge is not anymore distributed pre-eminently from the elders towards the youngsters (Giddens, 2006) it is an age deprived of the social prestige that once haloed it. It is a tradition not truly counterbalanced by a more up-to-date imagery of ageing and old age. Narratives of active ageing or of successful ageing (Rowe & Kahn, 1998; Gamber, 2010), able to create a sense of empowering for old people are renowned and, subsequently, ready to be criticised in other parts of the world (Lamb, 2014; Gilleard & Higgs, 2013), while in Romania they are either missing, or remain peripheral⁶ (Gherman,

⁴ See, for example (Pleșu, 2016).

⁵ See, for example, Totul despre mame (2017). Când Bunica Te Scoate din Minți [When Grandma Drives You Crazy]. *SmartWoman*, 14 February, <http://smartwoman.hotnews.ro/Cand-bunica-te-poate-scoate-din-min-I>, last time consulted in 09.01.2018; MamaInRomania (2017). Care-i Treaba cu Babuța Topless [What's the Thing with the Topless Granny]. *SmartWoman*, 10 July, <http://smartwoman.hotnews.ro/Care-i-treaba-cu-babuta-topless>, last time consulted in 09.01.2018.

⁶ Sometimes, the intention to offer another perspective on old age in Romania (which can be *fun*) becomes an expression of mockery. See, for instance, (Negoescu, 2012).

2014; Craciun, 2012). A side, but illustrative aspect, is the fact that Romanians have a very low level of physical activity, in comparison to European countries (SESPA, 2014) and, for example, only 2% of them are practising a sport on a daily basis, when it is considered to be one of the key elements for a successful ageing (Toplean, 2016: 212). Persistent physical activity correlates with wealth (Smith *et al.*, 2015), but Romanian old people are among the poorest in European Union, an aspect that precludes them from being interested in adopting active ageing strategies and engaging in community (Craciun, 2014: 118-119), especially after retirement. In a world that praises exactly the opposite of what is expected from old people, namely activity, self-transformation, entitlement, exceeding one's own limits (Lasch, 1991; Foley, 2011), the elders can only be vulnerable, and the imagery of old age anachronic.

Demographic issues are constantly brought into discussion in Romanian mass-media, especially recently, due to political uncertainties and general dissatisfaction with government's measures. There is almost no week without articles and news⁷ regarding the constant and alarming decreasing of birth rate in Romania⁸, many of them drawing sceptical scenarios regarding the near future, with a special focus on the state's incapacity to provide care for its numerous elders and even the collapse of the pension system. It is a world view which transforms demographics in assets and burdens (CNPV, 2017: 19): children and youths are assets, while old age becomes a social and political problem, if not a stigma, which is in accordance with the findings of other international studies (Mullan, 2002; Gullette, 2017: 4). Furthermore, as in any society where paid work is highly valued, old age and the elderly risk to appear as something structurally opposed (Stoiciu, 2010), the usual suspects from an ethical point of view. The phenomenon was excellently documented, some decades ago, by Richard Sennett (1998).

⁷ Only a few examples: http://economie.hotnews.ro/stiri-finante_banci-22046347-primele-8-luni-din-acest-nascut-65-000-mai-putini-copii-decat-aceiasi-perioada-din-anul-trecut.htm, 10 October 2017, last time consulted in 15.11.2017. <https://www.medlife.ro/oms-imbatranirea-populatiei-va-domina-ordinea-de-zi-in-politicile-de-sanatate.html>, 6 November 2017, last time consulted in 15.11.2017.

⁸ In the last years, there seems to be a general concern with the decreasing of birth rate and fertility which often exerts social pressures on women, encouraging them to have children in order to save Romanian nation. A peak was attained with the discourse of the Romanian ex-president, Traian Basescu: <http://www.mediafax.ro/social/basescu-natalitatea-misiune-pe-care-si-femeile-trebuie-sa-si-o-asume-cum-dumnezeu-femeia-roma-poate-tine-cinci-sase-copii-iar-romanca-nu-poate-10982478>, 18 June 2013, last time consulted in 15.11.2016.

Representations of old people in the context of 2017's public manifestations

The Romanian government adopted the ordinance 13 (OUG 13/2017), perceived as an attempt to decriminalise corruption, on 31st of January and, after that, there were many protests all over the country, with a peak in February 5, when more than 500.000 people participated⁹. The society became polarised between those who believed there was an urgency to react to government's intentions, or even to overthrow it, and those who did not.

Within the logic of the narratives that emerged then, the moral responsible for the protests were the old people who voted for the left-centred Social Democratic Party (PSD), while the active trigger of these street protests was the young generation who seemed to be determined to *take back its future*: "Old people decide our destiny", said a Romanian rapper on his Facebook page, insisting on the urge to participate in the protests¹⁰. The episode that legitimated the factual and symbolic designation of old people as guilty was that of the counter-manifestations allegedly organised by the Social Democratic Party, with 8000 participants, in February 25¹¹. Back then, mass-media insisted that the great majority of them were old people, impression that was traceable also within the public space¹².

Our analysis is directed towards the most substantial blog articles inspired by the 2017's public manifestations and addresses the topic of old people and ageing, also taking into consideration other mass-media articles and reactions related to the elders, mostly from the same period. There were two criteria for texts selection. Firstly, due to its flexibility in terms of content production compared with traditional media (Leaning, 2009: 56-60), we considered new media to be more capable in exhibiting (and, subsequently, spreading) more genuine reactions towards old age, in the context of such hectic events, when it becomes easy for any trace of political correctness and politeness to fall apart. Moreover, research has shown that old media is either a place where stereotypes and conventional attitudes towards old age are perpetuated (Bower, 2011: 45-51), or where old people are extremely underrepresented relative to other categories, especially in printed news and advertising (Zhang *et al.*, 2006; Hazaparu, 2011: 331). Secondly, we selected only those texts with a comprehensive narrative dimension concerning

⁹ <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/02/06/europe/romania-protests-update/index.html>, last time consulted in 09.01.2018.

¹⁰ https://www.dcnews.ro/proteste-de-amploare-in-pia-a-victoriei-ini-iate-de-un-cantare-batranii-ne-hotarasc-soarta_530072.html, last time consulted in 20.12.2017.

¹¹ <http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-21632280-miting-psd-targoviste-pest-8-000-persoane-participat-actiunea-sustinere-guvernului-grindeanu.htm>, last time consulted in 20.12.2017.

¹² See, for example, the numerous videos posted on YouTube channel, either by media trusts or by ordinary people: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_7czGy34mak, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Mq8xiDfaf4>. See also: <https://www.vice.com/ro/article/3d7xz9/cum-a-simitit-o-jurnalista-straina-protestele-de-la-cotroceni-fata-de-cele-din-piata-victoriei>, last time consulted in 09.01.2018. In fact, there is already a tradition in associating old people (especially retirees) with the trust and sympathy for PSD.

old age and old people in order to better examine the ways in which their social representations are constructed. The main blog articles analysed totalizes more than 260.000 readings.

From a general linguistic perspective, what is common both for the narratives and for the reactions they entailed is that they deploy a virulent rhetoric (sometimes very close to hate speech) and they heavily use a dichotomic social syntax, namely the syntax of war¹³. By social syntax we mean a manner of organising language, with great impact on one's ability to produce and understand social representations. These characteristics may vary in intensity, but they remain valid, be it in the case of more intellectual discourses, such as the one authored by Gabriel Liiceanu (2017) and published on the collective blog/online platform, *Contributors*, or in the case of texts produced by bloggers (Bozieru, 2017; Bacanu, 2017; Sfirlogea, 2017), common people brought in the foreground by mass-media (*Viral of the day: The Trenchant Message of a Young Woman of the Diaspora towards the Romanian Retirees: Hands off from our Future*, 2017) and many mass-media accounts. Actually, this syntax of war is already a thanatic imprint of the analysed narratives. It suggests the fact that young generations and old people are incompatible and are fighting for the same symbolical and material resources. The social syntax of war is to be found, as our paper illustrates, at various levels: at an inter-personal level: the sharp distinction between *us and them*, where *us* refers to the authors of the discussed articles and opinions, and *them* refers to Romanian old people; at a macro-social level: the intergenerational conflict between the young and the elders that all the texts address; at a historical and political level: the strong contrast between the future/the democratic society represented by the young people vs. the past/the oppressive communism represented by old people.

We, the youth, have a message for you: hands off from our future! You lived your life, you ate your porridge! You made a revolution and still for nothing. You enjoy living in a country that's making itself a laughing stock. Where everybody steals shamelessly. Do not tell us what we should consider good for our future. Stop being troublesome! (Viral of the day, 2017)¹⁴.

¹³ See, for example, the title of an online news article that contains an inexistent word such as “tineriada”, which would be translated as “youth crusade” <http://www.ziare.com/stiri/justitie/tineriada-continua-un-antreprenor-si-a-facut-birou-in-piata-victoriei-altul-le-a-facut-program-flexibil-angajatilor-ca-sa-poata-protesta-1452314>, last time consulted in 09.01.2018.

¹⁴ All quotes are translated by the authors of this article.

Instruments of constructing old people's identity

What seems to be at stake in these narratives is not only to point the finger at the elders for the political and social mess that is believed to reign over nowadays Romania. Such an approach would have been deemed superficial even by its own proponents, while all these texts manifest the ambition to offer a throughout diagnosis of the society's current state. Thus, consciously or not, they engage in an endeavour to undermine the particular identities of old people by constructing instead a common, negative universal identity. We identified three instruments through which this general identity is shaped, namely: horizontal and vertical generalisation, the attack on positive stereotypes and the symbolic relegation of elders into a radical Otherness.

The life of old people, the meanings and interpretations of old age are generalised both horizontally and vertically. The horizontal generalisation is the generalisation operated on the axis of the present: the idea is that all that old people do, believe and say, their deeds, symbolic gestures, words and thoughts, have the same, undifferentiated sociocultural value, unveiling them as egoist, lacking dignity, obstinate, narrow-minded, and irrevocably obsolete. Not even a prominent traditional role as the one of grandparenting - of extreme importance today too in Romania (Dolbin-MacNab & Yancura, 2018: 16-19) - is mentioned. Nothing disrupts what seems to be a litany of prayers against the massified identity of old people.

The vertical generalisation manifests when the narratives proceed to archaeology of old people's life, focusing on the past. A past understood as a homogenised, without real choices, totally controlled and predictable time. Today's old people are individuals who were always told what to think and to believe in, especially under the communist regime, where they were profoundly submissive – a feature that according to these texts remains prominent today too. The real life during the communist era is ignored or considered irrelevant. There is a process of de-historicisation, of bracketing the historical characteristics and their impact on people, by deriding or by minimalizing them:

The life for which you commiserate them followed, in the great majority of cases, a pattern of creepy simplicity (...) Poor as it was, the life typical for those years characterised by the terrible stress of endless queues for food, by the cold within the houses or by the fear of being supervised and arrested, was predictable, and, to a great extent, without the responsibility of important decisions (Bozieru, 2017).

Actually, there is nothing wrong with today's old people. They are just Romanian ex-peasants or children of these, educated to believe that nothing should change and that any small deviation from the rules in which they once believed – deemed as tradition – can only bring bad things (Sfirlogea, 2017).

The past is reinterpreted as easy to live in compared with current times that are considered to be difficult, mainly due to economic instability, overwhelming stress and the long working hours. Both nostalgia (for the communist uncomplicated life-style) and frustration (elicited by an ever-changing present) form the emotional magma of many of these narratives, which incorporate a paradox: the authors complain about a dynamic, unpredictable, continuously changing world, but acclaim their own generation for its capacity to love changes and praise innovation.

Another instrument of constructing a generalised, negative identity of old people consists in the pretence of debunking positive stereotypes. It is just that the stereotypes are only attacked. If debunking implies a process where critical thinking is put in motion, the mechanisms of attacking are emotional and irrational. Thus, the positive stereotypes are not dismantled, but only replaced with negative ones.

The attacks concentrate especially on three positive stereotypes. First, the wisdom thought to be specific for old age is replaced with the idea that old people are brainwashed by politicians and corrupted television (as opposed to the internet used by younger generations), which generates ignorance and even stupidity (“you, mindless old people”, *Viral of the day*, 2017), traits that lead them to fall into various traps of manipulation:

Today, the reeducation camp moved in the dining room, in front of the TV; the victim sits in a chair or on a sofa, drinks beer or crunches junk food, while the oppressor plays with their brain from a TV screen. Today, shits are prepared to be swallowed with the brain (Liiceanu, 2017).

Secondly, strongly correlated with wisdom, the experience – in the sense of enriching personal experiences that people have and learn from during their lifespan – is replaced with the idea of infantilism and poverty. Old people are seen as very similar to babies and likewise, incapable of truly personal opinions. And for all that, they are held responsible as well. In fact, sometimes infantilism is understood as senility: “the quasi-senile PSD voters” (Bozieru, 2017). It is not really seen as a senility that irradiates from inside, a consequence of brain ageing, but rather a social consequence of elders’ life choices. In the same way, poverty determines the alteration of any moral demeanour: “old people vote for PSD because their greatest majority is so poor that any charity is welcomed” (Sfirlogea, 2017, comment).

Kindness is the third positive stereotype attacked by advancing instead the negative conception of old people being all egoist and full of hatred towards the youngsters (strangers or relatives). Two brief examples (otherwise numerous fragments could be quoted) look like this:

The retirees destroy the ball of the children playing in front of their homes and, during the electoral years, rip through their indifference and lack of common sense the hope out of the youngster. The retirees think only at themselves, not understanding that only together and by offering support and sympathy to the young ones we can make it. (...) They refuse change and deny the right of others to be happy, with that egoist and perfidious hatred (Bacanu, 2017).

The wisdom and the kindness of old people, that the fairy tales talk about, had been replaced by egoism, aggressiveness, malice, double standard. They can stand up for hours at the protest or waiting to kiss relics, but they cannot stand up on the bus, for one station. They complain of lacking power, but they throw you down at the queues or when they get on the bus. They simple become brutified (Bozieru, 2017, comment).

A consequence of overusing negative stereotypes of old people is that they are hold accountable for absolutely everything that goes wrong in nowadays Romania¹⁵. Aggressively blaming old people for all of the world's problems is a side effect well illustrated by the following text:

I saw my great son having 3 jobs at almost 23 years, passing through interviews conducted in foreign languages, through computer exams and psychological evaluation (...) and his future may not be in Romania. So, do not be mad at me if I refuse to melt of compassion when seeing that toothless, but insulting mouth (...) I cannot really die of compassion because, on February 10, I have to give 200 lei for the dental appointment of my son (Bozieru, 2017).

These narratives emphasise that Romanian old people are the Other. An 'Other' that has very few things in common with us. They are as different as possible: historically: they are stuck in the communist era, socially: they are retirees that have abandoned their role of active citizens, sitting all day in front of the TV, economically: they are poor and need to be cared for, morally and politically: they are not able to distinguish between good and bad and they continue to vote, on each occasion, for PSD. Old people are symbolically relegated to a radical otherness. They become all that we are not. This radical otherness is founded mainly through false generalizations, over exaggerations and the incapacity of these narratives to see old people as beings with rich and diverse personal histories.

The social bounds and compassion are recognized and accepted only to be marked as a sort of siren song which could lure the naive and ignorant to be sympathetic with the elderly: "Let's finish once and for all with these excuses that oh, my god, they are retirees, our parents, our grandparents" (Bozieru, 2017, comment). Some of the people posting comments on the analysed blog articles go even further and propose or just imagine alternative political systems from which elders would be excluded for the sake of the others (of *us*), or even for their own good:

¹⁵ See also the very subtle observations of Vintila Mihailescu (2017): "Old people – namely, simply putted, ours parents – are becoming scapegoats for youth's narrow-mindedness and failures – namely, simply putted, our own children".

And when you think that your vote values as much as the vote of the toothless... They harm themselves without even noticing. It would be much better for them and for us if they would not vote (Liiceanu, 2017, comment).

Thanatic imagery

Death functions as a significant mechanism through which the construction of the collective identity of old people is produced. Its presence can already be noticed, in what we have discussed until now, in subtle ways, as a continue social disproof and menace directed towards the elders, as a drive and motivator to exclude them from anything that has to do with politics. Fact is, exclusion is always, scholars say, the first and surest step towards social death (Králová, 2015). Because excluding others ultimately makes them irrelevant and invisible, depriving them from their social identity and connectivity. As killing is strictly forbidden in Western, modern cultures, instilling hatred towards a social category can also be seen as a surrogate of murderer (Maisondieu, 2002: 85-91).

If the previous means of constructing old people's negative identity testify rather of an impulse to undermine their identities – a process situated rather at the unconscious level –, the use of thanatic metaphors is a much clearer signal that between undermining one's identity and the risk of wittingly condemning them to social death there is not such a big step. We identified three main thanatic metaphors in the analysed narratives. These metaphors are central and important, revealing a Romanian collective imagery of old age imbued with death. They are frequently used several times in the same text, which sometimes they transgress, being incorporated in other texts or in comments, either in those sympathising with the content or, on the contrary, in those, numerous, contesting the exposed ideas. The most prominent is definitely the already mentioned “toothless mouth”. There is a strong cultural and symbolic correlation between falling or loosening teeth and death, at least in Romanian popular culture. For example, it is believed that dreaming a falling tooth announce death¹⁶.

This metaphor, used by Romanian philosopher Gabriel Liiceanu in his text: *The toothless mouth Romania* (2017), became a sort of refrain that appears also in other texts from the same period and in their numerous comments. As it is used by Liiceanu and others, the metaphor constructs an image of old age defined by ugliness, body decay, poverty and incapacity to self-help. Furthermore, the toothless mouth symbolises the fact that, socially and politically, the elders are voiceless or have no power to articulate change through their words or opinions. Liiceanu infuses the “toothless mouth” with a heavy symbolism originating in communism, where the toothless mouths were the regrettable consequences of applying torture. He stresses that in nowadays Romania there is no apparent torture,

¹⁶ https://www.romaniatv.net/vise-care-prevestesc-vesti-proaste-si-boli_155058.html#n, last time consulted in 12.01.2018.

but still, the toothless mouths proliferate. In a classic case of Stockholm syndrome, the new victims (old people) are not only tortured, but become dependent and fascinated with their new torturers, namely the manipulative TV channels.

Many of those which posted comments to Liiceanu's article exaggerated his relative moderate tone so that they fervently criticised or, on the contrary, they fiercely defended old people and old age, discussing their connections with poverty. Some of the those who posted comments attacked the metaphor of the toothless mouth as an indicator of ageing, cognitive decline and poverty, observing that it is related rather with consumerist eating habits:

The toothless human being. Today too, the poor are still the toothless ones. Those who are masters of their destiny, free people satisfied with their life are distinguished by this small 'visible' element (Liiceanu, 2017, comment).

What mister Liiceanu does not tell us is that disinformation and brainwashing function both for those with white and perfect teeth, like in toothpaste advertisements (...) It has to be said that in many rural communities, people had intact teeth even when growing old because they were eating what they were producing themselves. Now the addiction to sugar and the derived products ruined both their pancreas and their teeth (Liiceanu, 2017, comment).

The second thanatic metaphor is that of *the bowed head* (from the Romanian adage: *bowed head sword will not cut off*). In English, a non-literal equivalent that however does not contain all the aggressive nuances from Romanian would be: *better to be a live dog than a dead lion*. This metaphor is used when submissiveness and human degradation, both moral and corporal are highlighted and criticised as typical for Romanian old people. The metaphor – functioning as the text's main idea and as argument used to persuade the readers appears in one of the analysed articles (Sfirlogea, 2017) where is repeated five times throughout the text and intends to highlight old people's communist roots. Again, they are seen, paradoxically, as having been always old and responsible for accepting all the injustices of the communist regime. It is almost as if their guilt, a guilt that emanates from their age (their *old* age) would reverberate on their younger selves. The metaphor of the bowed head can be considered thanatic in two ways. First, it implies the idea of personal diminishment that will eventually culminate by physical death and, second, it suggests an attitude of denial, an incapacity to accept the prospect of death (Becker, 1973): the head bows in order to allow the avoidance of looking in the eyes of a (potentially) deadly danger. The comments stimulated by the presence of this metaphor were more aggressive than the reactions to the 'toothless mouth' and it is visible that many of the readers felt encouraged to employ other thanatic metaphors or stronger death references, either trying to protect old people's rights or, on the contrary, continuing to attack them.

Get back, you idiot, to your work and pay from your money the euthanasia of your damned mother and father, because the state will bury them from your money, you darn moron (Sfirlogea, 2017, comment).

What's next? The only thing left is to set them on fire or execute them (Sfirlogea, 2017, comment).

Living on borrowed time (or *fading away*, or *reaching the end of line*) is the third metaphor identified in the analysed texts. More literally, the Romanian adage would sound like: *you lived your life, you ate your porridge*. This metaphor is present as such – in some comments but especially in the message of the young woman of the diaspora accusing elders for her being forced to live abroad (*Viral of the day*, 2017) – while other texts do not strictly mention it, but preserve the idea. For example, old people are seen as biological expressions of death. As they do not have too much time left in this world, they are deprived of entitlement to make decisions that could impact on the future: “it is not normal that those that are leaving this life destroy the future of our children and their grandchildren” (Sfirlogea, 2017). According to this simplistic perspective, *they* are on the side of death, while *we* are on the side of life. No intergenerational communication is allowed, not only in these few rows, but in basically all the analysed texts. Old people remain textual figures that risk to hear their sentence to (social) death.

The metaphor has a semantic quasi-equivalent in the idea of sacrifice. As one of the authors claims (Bacanu, 2017), because their life is almost over, old people should sacrifice for the younger ones. In this sense, she proposes the distinction between grandparents and retirees. The firsts are to be found in countries such as Japan, where old people offered themselves to clean the Fukushima nuclear power plant after the nuclear disaster¹⁷(because cellular division normally slows in old age, they were less rapidly affected by an otherwise almost sure cancer) and the others in Romania. What these narratives try to convey by using the metaphors of living on borrowed time and the imagery of sacrifice is that old people have a moral obligation to activate a sort of what can be called ‘death instinct’ and stop living when their social existence becomes useless. Converting this suggestion into a statement would be too brutal, so that the authors resort to natural laws: *The order of things on earth: never live longer than our children* (Bacanu, 2017). It would not be too much to say that, according to these texts, if suicide is not an option, then actively seeking for opportunities to sacrifice – in order to regain social relevance and lost respect – is truly desirable. And, if the elders do not succeed in finding these opportunities, they are advised to withdraw from the society, an idea that was highly appreciated and emphasised by various comments:

¹⁷ The Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster was an energy accident produced at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, in Ōkuma, Fukushima, Japan, first provoked by the tsunami following the Tohoku earthquake on 11 March 2011. It generated a lot of material for mass-media all over the world.

If they are old and miserable, if they are irresponsible, they should not mix in politics and stay the hell at home! (Bozieru, 2017, comment).

This powerful idea of old people's 'normal' sacrifice is an indicator that in Romania old age tends to be understood in a very narrow and negative manner, as deprivation of social prestige and even of social identity, and also that there is a trend to appreciate old people almost exclusively for their capacity to be helpful for others. However, the mere existence of comments where the social rights and the humanity of old people are defended and which manifest dissatisfaction with this kind of narratives and their approving, sometimes exuberant comments, also indicates that everything is not lost.

Conclusion

The study pointed out the existence of a negative typified and stereotyped public image of old age and the elderly usually invisible because of social conventions regulating the content of texts disseminated in public space/media.

There are three main instruments that shape the negative identity of Romanian elders: the horizontal and vertical generalization, the refute of positive stereotypes and their replacement with negative ones, and the relegation of old people in a radical otherness. Thus, according to the horizontal generalization (operated on the axis of the present by the analysed narratives and some of their online comments), it becomes obvious that everything old people do, say or believe is emblematic for their egoism, stubbornness, and irrevocable obsolescence. The vertical generalization is the process of generalization referring to the past of old people that brings in the foreground the 'de-historicised' image of Romanian communism. Contesting the positive stereotyped representations of old people could be a wise thing to do, but when they are only tempestuously attacked and replaced with negative clichés it is actually worse, because both the positive and the negative stereotypes are preserved in the collective social imagery and the social vulnerability of old people increases. The traditional image of old age wisdom is superseded with traits as ignorance and stupidity, the enriching nature of life experience with infantilism and senility, and kindness with egoism. In a logically inconsistent way, old people are transformed by these narratives into a radical negative Other. Thereby, the use of the three thanatic metaphors (the toothless mouth, the bowed head and living on borrowed time) and the risk they are indicating, namely the risk of condemning old people to social death appear as an unfortunate output with negative practical consequences in what concerns the social inclusion of the elders. The thanatic imagery of these narratives (comprising here also the comments posted to the texts) is especially palpable in ideas such as the sacrifice of old people for the benefits of the younger citizens and the cognitive,

moral and physical decline that, from the perspective of these narratives, seems to characterise the majority of Romanian old people.

These narratives are not monopolising the social images of Romanian old people and we have to acknowledge that their excessive tone was partially due to the protest manifestations which inflamed pre-existent social, economic and political anxieties. However, they are neither peripheral, they do indicate an alarming social tendency: that of a negative perception of old people and old age. Moreover, it is exactly this kind of emotionally charged events that determines social veils to fall down so that the politically-correct discourses evaporates and genuine beliefs took the floor. Eventually, our research findings make evident that public policies of social inclusion are still far from success in eradicating hateful speeches and malignant representations of vulnerable groups, in this case, the elders. Positive official discourses such as the one of the Romanian national strategy designed to promote the social inclusion of the elders, considered to be among the most vulnerable categories in a country where “the elderly population will increase, putting further strains on government revenues derived from income taxes and increasing demand for pensions, healthcare, and elderly care” (NSSI, 2015:102), easily coexist with parallel discourses that are threatening the very nature of what an active citizenship and an inclusive society truly mean.

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