

# **TIME OVER TIME**

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What does time mean for a diasporic community? Does it have any special dimensions? Do the members of such a community feel any particular connection to time?

I believe they do. I believe time is differentiated for them in comparison to the linear time that everyone else perceives. For them there are special associations that the others cannot understand. The past has a double perspective, in a personal way and in a situational way, so to say. There is an individual past and, in this case, Romanian past. Sometimes, though, this Romanian past comes to live. It comes closer, it gets vivid. Sometimes the Swiss reality is paused and leaves place for the Romanian one.

To my mind, in a community time is more flexible and more complex. It gets more meaning and more symbols attached to it. Time can replace time.

And this happens to the Romanian in Switzerland, too.

Time is a linear dimension of our life. Time means a past, a present and a future and these three divisions can be more or less separated in our minds. Most of those for whom the social environment does not change from a cultural point of view during a lifetime associate different events with separate moments in time. For them the background of these happenings is pretty much the same and although that might not seem suggestive, it actually offers much information about the exact situation. What about those for whom the environment does change? I believe that for a diasporic community, so to say, for those people who live in another country than their home one, time has, in addition to its general understanding, one more level. Indeed, they still associate certain events with certain moments in time. But at a broader scale, I tend to think that somehow for these people time is also divided in its three dimensions according to where they live. In the case of the community I have been observing, that of the Romanians living in Switzerland, the past (distant or not so distant) is connected to Romania, the present to Switzerland and the future, separately, for some of them to Romania and for others (most of them) to Switzerland.

But why would there exist a special relationship between these people and time and even space? What makes a diasporic community special in itself? According to Safran, there are several dimensions that distinguish a diaspora: 1) it is dispersed from an original “center” to at least two “peripheral” places; 2) it maintains a “memory, vision or myth about the original homeland”; 3) diasporas believe they are not and perhaps cannot be fully accepted by their host country; 4) they see their ancestral home as a place of eventual return, when time is right; 5) they are committed to the maintenance or restoration of their homeland; 6) the group’s consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by this continuing relationship with the homeland (James Clifford – Diasporas). Diasporas are different from travel in that they are not temporary. They involve

dwelling, having communities and collective homes away from “home”. They are, in Clifford’s words, “ “not-here” to say”. As far as the temporal dimension is concerned, Clifford argues that somehow the linear history of diasporas is broke, the present constantly shadowed by a past that is also a desired but sometimes obstructed future (Clifford – Diasporas). One could talk about an “antiteleological or sometimes messianic temporality in this respect.” There is something like a constitutive taboo on return or its postponement to a remote future (Clifford – Diasporas).

Another thing that is related to time in the special case of diasporic communities is that the two levels of time that I have mentioned above (time as a personal experience divided into past, present and future - 1<sup>st</sup> level - and time as a rather cultural, social experience divided into past, present and future but in a rather spacial way - 2<sup>nd</sup> level) merge into one another through these virtual facilities such as the Internet. A web-site dedicated to such a community of people is, to my mind, a combination of, in my case, a Romanian past and a Swiss present. Indeed, it might be argued that the information one can find on the site deals with the Romanian reality, the Romanian present. To a large extent it is true. Still, even this present Romanian reality is perceived from a distance by the members of the community. It might affect them inside, but not outside. It might be of interest to them, but then again, from a more intellectual point of view, so to say, because the events that occur in their home-country have no direct effects on them. They might talk about it and debate on it, but this attitude is, somehow, just an expression of their Romanianity, of their nationalism. It might sound strange and illogical, but I believe that this Romanian present that is subject of their conversations and projects and sites is somehow perceived, even at an unconscious level, as a past in itself. It is something they have gone away from, it is something that they feel only in an indirect way. There is an inner obstacle that separates their present from the Romanian one. And another argument that comes to support my idea would be that on the web-site one can find information and articles that have to do with Romanian traditions, with Romanian religion, culture, things that belong to the Romanian past. Therefore,

through a virtual space past and present are brought together. Clifford cites Safran's idea that the main thing that unites a diaspora is the symbol of the homeland. Yet, this is not the only thing that connects them. There also are the so-called "lateral connections" that are just as important. "The paradox of diasporas is that dwelling *here* assumes a solidarity and connection *there*. But *there* is not necessarily a single place or an exclusivist nation." (Clifford – Diasporas).

Moreover, I have realised through my personal "German experience" that people tend to feel more national when abroad. We live in a globalising world, a world that tends to level all people. Projects such as the European Union unwillingly impose on us standards that we end up considering desirable, sets of values that we end up respecting and appreciating, models that we end up trying to copy. Still, at a certain moment, we tend to deny all this uniformization that is imposed on us and fight for our specificity. Again a theoretical problem: what is specificity? What is the identity of a person, the ethnicity, the nationality? Is it something given or something created? Barth talks about a "transactional ethnicity" that is the result of internal and external definitions. The identity of a community is created by both its self-definition and the definition that the others give to it. Somehow one could talk about the difference between a category (seen from the outside) and a group (seen from the inside). I would say that for a diasporic community, the external definition is a lot more closer to the members of the community than it usually is to the members of a country that actually live in that country. In a united Europe, one of the best ways for diasporic communities to create their specificity is through virtual websites and, of course, through common meetings and events that bring the members together and not just them, but their cultural similar backgrounds, too. Somehow, to turn to the time dimensions that I wish to focus on, a diasporic community tries to keep its specificity by bringing past and present together. Or by creating "past breaks" in the "present continuity".

I have depicted all these ideas by observing the web-site [www.casa-romanilor.ch](http://www.casa-romanilor.ch) . Throughout my reports I have tried to describe the site in its passive and active parts. The passive one is formed of the distinct sections of the site, meaning “About us”, “Cultural”, “Churches”, “Organisations”, “Regional initiatives” and “Useful information”. The section entitled “Diaspora” would stand somehow in the middle of this categorisation, since it is passive on its own, but active in meaning. It practically invites the Romanians in Switzerland to get in contact with members of other Romanian diasporic communities in the world. On the other hand, the active part of the site is made up of the group of discussions and, more recently, since the end of March, of the forum. I consider that all the different sections of these two parts can be tackled from a time-oriented perspective. I think that somehow the information on this site can be divided into “Romania past-oriented”, “Switzerland present-oriented” and “Romania/Switzerland future oriented”. Of course, these would be just the broad categories since, as I have already mentioned it, the two levels of time merge into each other.

The first thing one can see on the site is the home page. The logo, the flags of the two countries combined, show a desire of uniting these two cultures, these two communities. The weather forecast described on the Swiss map, on the other hand, is a sign of the present necessity for adaptation. In ce certain way, these two things, the logo and the map, prove the tendencies of the community. They wish to bring together Romania and Switzerland, but at a pragmatic level, at an every-day life level, they are more anchored in the Swiss reality. They have to be and I believe that they actually should be. The social environment, the place one lives in affects his/her life. If the Swiss reality is not satisfactory, they would all feel the consequences. If the Romanian reality is not satisfactory, they would only perhaps feel the consequences inside themselves, because Romania is their home country, but not their residence country.

The other information that appears on the home-page could be placed under the broader term of “news”. Cultural news, political news, news that only concerns the community. There also are links towards pictures taken at different

events and, of course, links towards the special section dedicated to... news, meaning links for Romanian and Swiss newspapers and magazines.

## ABOUT US

This section of the site is dedicated to presenting the first initiative that led to the coming into being of this virtual space. In February 2003 was created the group of discussions that was meant to represent and somehow bring together all the forums on which Romanians in Switzerland were writing. It was meant to be “more personal, more direct, more open, more effective”. Once the group of discussions started functioning, the first real meetings between the members occurred. The main goal was to create a true juridical organisation meant to support Romanian initiatives throughout Europe. In this respect was published the questionnaire of the Romanian in Switzerland, several contact e/mail addresses appeared on the site. So, this was the beginning.

How is this related to time and space? The mere initiative (and the fact that it proved successful) shows how these people were somehow trying to combine two worlds, two spaces, two “times”. The group of discussions, the first thing of this web-site that appeared, was dedicated, mainly, to the Romanians in Switzerland. The two countries were meant to be brought together through these people. The past Romania, the place where they had come from, and the present Switzerland, the place where they lived, and all the symbols they carried within were meant to be united. Why do I talk about symbols? Because both time and space mean something according to the interpretations people give to them, according to the symbols they attach to them. In this case, the members of the Romanian diaspora in Switzerland wanted to represent a strong, juridical organisation. They wanted to represent an effective Romanian space in the Swiss whole. Accordingly, they wanted to bring some life to their past into the present they were living.

Why this desire? Or even necessity? Whether we admit it or not, we are connected to the people that have gone through the same experiences as us. They are able to understand us without us having to explain the context in so

many words to them. The past in the same general context has the force of uniting people. Emigrating is an out-of-the-ordinary experience in its nature and as a result people who have emigrated have one additional reason to feel close to one another, beside their national one.

## CULTURAL

This section seems to be mainly dedicated to the Romanian artists (writers, singers, actors) who live and work in Switzerland. What I find more interesting as far as this part of the site is concerned is the cultural agenda. Here one can see all the Romanian cultural events that take place in Switzerland, being either Romanian music, painture, photography, films, poems or dance, carols, literature.

Relating this segment of the site to my theme, I would like to stress the importance of culture in creating a nation. It is said that it is not nations that create nationalism, but nationalism that creates nations. And nationalism, in its turn, is created by common history, common religion, values, culture. Therefore, by presenting Romanian cultural events, especially traditional ones, such as music, carols, folklore, dances, the hidden idea or wish is to create a connection between the people of the same cultural background. Indeed, it might be stated that the culture of the world we live in now, the modernity, has many similarities irresective of culture. But one cannot say the same about the traditions that go back in time. These could only be understood by those who grew up in this atmosphere, by those who had and understood these values, these forms of art. Therefore, these cultural events that are presented on the site and that go deep into the Romanian traditions and time and that explore the Romanian culture as a whole are designed to bring unity between the Romanian abroad. In this way (through events) something that is very distant in time and space is brought closer, is made touchable, is given life.

The artists that are presented on the first page of this section could somehow be perceived as a link between two worlds and “times”. They come from Romania, they are accustomed to the Romanian reality, but, as the

members of the community, they live and produce their artistic works in Switzerland. They could be looked at as models of adaptation. Moreover, I believe that except for the opera singers that can bring little of their Romanianity to their work, the others (writers or painters) express themselves having a Romanian core. The past talks through their present with an echo towards the future. The writer Cătălin Dorian Florescu perhaps best illustrates this, since the themes he chose for some of his books were related to Romania and since he admits, in the interview that appeared on the web-site, that he feels closer to Romania than to Switzerland.

One of the temporary articles that appear in this section and that is now to be found on the site could also be viewed from a time-oriented perspective. There is one project going on meant to have as a result an album describing the Communist atrocities and the way they affected the destinies of innocent people, in this case of lawyer V. Gerogerscu Barlad and his family. What I would like to emphasize and what I find interesting is the fact that Communism is brought into discussion. Most of the members of the Romanian community in Switzerland are in their 30's and 40's. Many of them have left Romania during Communism and many of their families have had to leave in order to escape from the regime. Therefore for many of the members Communism is something that has to do with their most private feelings, with their past. They understand Communism differently than just a political regime. For them, Communism, something that belongs to Romania's past, is something that unites them, even without so many words.

## CHURCHES

This chapter practically enumerates the Romanian orthodox churches that one can find throughout Switzerland.

Religion is something that has to do with culture, ethnicity, nationalism. Romania is a religious country and Orthodoxism is something that defines Romanians. Maybe it cannot be made a national emblem, but still, Orthodoxism is perceived as something that brings hope, comfort, peace. And even if not on a

regular basis, people do go to church and do celebrate the religious holidays. Moreover, religion is perceived as having to do with the Romanian tradition, Romanian soul. So... again something that is connected strictly to Romania comes forward. In the Swiss catholic environment, Orthodoxism is more related to the Romanian past experience as a whole than usual.

## ORGANISATIONS

This section of the site focuses on cultural organisations and projects. There are three organisations presented: the Romanian Cultural Center from Neuchatel, RO-CHance and Swiss-East European Entrepreneurship Development (SEED). The first one has as objectives promoting the Romanian culture, helping the integration of the Romanians from a social and cultural point of view and enabling the cultural exchanges. RO-CHance is a cultural project meant to promote the Romanian culture, language and image in Switzerland. SEED is meant to promote the entrepreneurial spirit in Eastern Europe, especially Romania, through successful examples of entrepreneurs from both countries, through lectures given on this subject, financial support and facilitation of the relationships between Romanian business-men and Swiss investors and through experience exchanges.

From a time perspective, I would say that the first two organisations are somehow past-oriented. The RCCN has organised different events that promote Romanian traditions and Romanian religion. Somehow those who take part in events such as “Orthodox Night” or “The Ball of the Martisor” (which is a specific Romanian holiday on the 1<sup>st</sup> of March) escape the reality and go back in time, to those moments when these celebrations were something maybe not ordinary, since they were once a year, but something that fitted the environment. It’s true that a holiday, a celebration is something special in itself, it needs no explanations for the feelings it causes in people. Still, having a typically Romanian holiday in a foreign society gathers deeper meaning. It brings with itself part of Romanianity, of Romanian ethnicity, of home. These kind of celebrations are flavouring the present that lacks... something. Otherwise they

would not feel the wish of respecting these traditions, of recreating home or part of what Romanian is there, in Switzerland.

In a certain way, I believe that the members of this community try to reconcile the past with the present. Romanianity, expressed through celebrations, food, music, art brings them together, keeps them together. By being able to talk and to express your most familiar part is somehow like making the past (the time when you did not feel you had this identity, this ethnicity, this need of showing it to the world, since you were too accustomed to it) and together with the time dimensions by making the space, Romania, come to live somewhere else.

#### REGIONAL INITIATIVES

I would like to talk in turns about all the initiatives described on the site.

“People for people” has a pragmatic purpose: it consists of a list of lawyers, doctors, teachers... that might be helpful for the Romanians in Switzerland at a certain moment in time. I am not positive that the fact that this list exists has any real effects outside the web-page, since not all the members of the community would travel in another city just to see a Romanian doctor, for instance. But I do believe that, if that were the case, the Romanians would be certain of very prompt help since isn't it, the doctor/lawyer... would be happy to have someone to talk to about the Romanian reality, too.

“Pele-Mele” is a web-site just as [www.casa-romanilor.ch](http://www.casa-romanilor.ch), but is restricted to the Romanians living in the French part of Switzerland. It probably tries to create an even stronger community, focusing not just on the past common experience of the Romanians, but also on the present common problems they have had.

“The Romanian Home” is a Romanian magazine that appears three times/year and that wants to be a way of connecting all the Romanians in Switzerland. Looking through the... virtual pages of the magazine, I couldn't help but notice that all the articles people have been writing for three years now deal almost exclusively with Romanian subjects. Are the Romanians living in

Switzerland connected just by their Romanianity manifested, in this particular case, through Romanian press? Their present is probably similar, too. Why don't they talk about it, too? Why do they always tackle subjects connected to Romania? Because, to my mind, this is what they lack. The present is something that they just live. The problems of the present are something that they face day by day, the Swiss reality is something that they feel day by day and they no longer feel the desire to talk about it. It's there, all the time, day in and day out. But the Romanian reality, their Romanian past is somewhere else. It takes a common effort to bring it closer, to put life and feeling in it.

"Romanian Wines" is a site from where one can purchase on line Romanian wines. To a foreigner, this might sound like a hypocritical attitude. But wines are part of a traditional Romanian holiday, for example. The home page of the site actually shows a girl dressed in traditional costume, carrying a basket full of grapes. Besides, Romanians have very good wines. So this is, too, like a stimulus towards remembering home.

"Romania Network" is an organisation of the French Swiss part which supports the economical development of Romania. It has, therefore, a pragmatical purpose. It is less (or in fact not at all) focused on this spiritual aspects of Romanianity, such as traditions, and instead is really off to do something effective.

"Operation Villages Roumains" is a project meant to help the Romanian villages that have been affected by the Communist regime (again Communism) and to establish connections between Romanian and Swiss villages. It seems to me that this project is again more pragmatic than any other way. It combines the Romanian past (past since some of those who had this initiative are Romanians living in Switzerland) and it brings it into present, it makes it alive. The same could be stated about the projects "Vully – Roumanie", a project of brotherhood between Romanian and Swiss villages, "Rumanien Direkthilfe", meant to support the North West region of Romania from an economical point of view and "Open Hand", a humanitarian project on a religious basis, meant to support a Romanian town.

“Open House”, “Verein CopiiiRO” and “Rumanisch-Schweizerisches Hilfswerk” are projects dedicated to the street-children in Romania. So, one could say again that these social initiatives are very much rooted in the present, since they actually want to do something, to change something for the better.

Last, but not least, in this section of the site one can find the description of the conference “Bucharest through Swiss eyes”. Therefore the present of these two environments, these two realities combines.

### USEFUL INFORMATION

In this section, unlike in the cultural or organisational ones, the time perspective is different. It is more present-oriented, perhaps through its nature of offering useful information. Romania is perceived closer, more alive. Suddenly it does not seem so far away anymore due to the subjects talked about such as tourism, visas, Romanian press, Romanian shops on-line. Romania becomes very reachable, it almost touches the Swiss present and reality.

What is interesting about this section and what I have found as a particularity of this site as a whole is the fact that it also has information strictly about the Swiss political, economical and social reality, the Swiss traditional cultural events. This is a sign of the adaptation and integration that the site wants to induce to the members of the community. This part focuses on the present of these members. It is as if for a second the past is left aside, Romania is left aside and the eyes are oriented towards what one can see easily. To a certain extent, one could say that this orientation, this focus on the present is the first step towards a future perfect adaptation in the Swiss society. Most of those who are here have been here for years and want to remain here.

As in the previous section, where one could read about Bucharest seen through the eyes of Swiss people, this section has something similar. It's like a turn of the situation, since now Romania is described through the eyes of the Swiss travellers. So, the present Romanian reality is brought closer and filtered through Swiss values and eyes. It is interesting to observe what a Swiss actually sees when going through Romania. In this respect, the pictures are illustrative.

The other testimony, the one that focuses on Romanian traditional dances, is also illustrative. One can see that the foreigners tend to appreciate more the traditional aspects of Romania. The problematic social ones are frequently left aside or seen as more picturesque than they actually are. So one can also see how the eyes of the Swiss people who have seen Romania tend to turn a little towards the past, towards the Romanian traditions.

#### DIASPORA

This section of the site is, in fact, a list of web-addresses of other sites dedicated to Romanian communities living abroad. As I have said before, this section is like a link between the strict passive part of the site and the active one. It invites to dialogue, to sharing of impressions. I would say that the passive part of the site is more past-oriented. "Diaspora", on the other hand, is somehow both past- and present-oriented. It tries to link Romanians who go through similar present situations, but in different countries. It's obvious that these people could not participate together at holidays or other traditional events, but they can talk about Romania and about their particular experiences abroad.

As I have said in the beginning, the active part is represented by the group of discussions and, more recently, by the forum. I think the conversations that are going on there are suggestive from a time perspective. One can see how these conversations developed in time, since February 2003 until April 2005. One can also see how the relationships between the members of the community are and how Romania is perceived in their dialogues and, moreover, some of the conversations prove the fact that there is no necessary equivalence between self-definition and public image (Jenkins). Some members of the community have created, out of the Romanian traditions, customs, history myths that they defend. Somehow they do not clearly perceive Romania or at least not objectively. They have, in their minds, a created image for Romania and they resort to it for comfort, for familiarity, for certainty. All these Romanian features offer a feeling of genuine, authenticity. Once confronted with the usually negative

stereotypes that people have for Romanians, they find themselves in the situation of re-imagining, re-creating the Romanian image (Mandaville). They recreate the traditions, the history, the culture. They celebrate with much more inner intimacy the typically Romanian holidays. They identify themselves with them much more than if they had been in Romania.

On the other hand, there are those Romanians that realize the problems of their home-country, they tend to see it more objectively, appreciating the positive parts and accusing the negative ones.

In order to show all these, I have decided to focus on one of the most active users of the site (there are 5 or 6 of them), Sorin Costea. Why did I choose him of all the others? Because by reading the messages they all posted, I felt that he is the most sincere, he is being himself. He is not trying to prove something and he has not tried this at the beginning either. He is just being himself.

Sorin Costea has not offered much information about himself. I could only deduce that he is in his 30's or 40's, married and with one child. He got to be a member of this group because the moderator of the group, Cosmin, found out his e-mail address and invited him to join the group. He refused to be part of the organasational committee, so to say, saying that he only wishes to talk to other people as freely and openly as possible. Even though all these might sound as if he were not a serious man, in time he proved that he is more dedicated to this group than he would actually admit. As I have perceived him, he is extremely intelligent and witty. He has an ironic and subtle style, yet not hurting people's feelings. He lives in Zurich for around 10 or 15 years, from what I could understand. I tried to sense his attitude as far as Romania is concerned, especially in relation with time. He seems to be very realistic, but at the same time, at a more intimate level of his being, very attached and protective of everything that is Romanian. Whenever Romania was attacked in conversations, somehow he was finding a strong argument in support of the country. Yet, when Romania was praised, he had a distant attitude, not wanting to praise something just out of emotional reasons. I've perceived him as very attached to Romania,

very much involved in the Romanian reality and very well informed about the Romanian past and present. Yet, his sometimes critical attitude proves that, involved as he might be, he is also somehow detached. He can say what the problems are, he can also name the strong points Romania has, but all these from a distance. He admits that he has a better life in Switzerland and that Romania couldn't offer him this. Is Romania home? No. Romania is his native country, the country of many of his friends, of his family. Home is where he feels like home. He is not so sentimentalistic about these issues. He once said that for him home is where he puts his head down on the pillow to sleep. He does not want to make of Romania more than it really is, to pretend now that everything that is Romanian is good and that he feels connected to every Romanian thing. No, he likes the Swiss organisation more, the Swiss rules. The present is very good for him and so he hopes the future will be. Yet, when some pictures taken in Bucharest showing some shameful things were put on the site, he was among the first to negatively react by saying that these pictures do not represent him. As I have said, he thinks that Romanians should accept their problems and deal with them not so openly in the international press. It is as if we would actually accept that we are all identified with the bad things that happen in the country.

In rest, he is always responding to the other messages posted in the group, messages that deal with computer things, messages that ask information about Switzerland. He is always helpful. Still, he seems more interested in political things. The messages he first posts are most of the times about politics in Romania. And most of his messages are not answered at. Still, the active users respect his opinion. He took part in the events that have been organised, but I feel a him the desire of normalising these relationships that have appeared between the members. The other memebtrs are more focused on organised things, on organised holidays. On the contrary, he posts messages such as "Anyone wants to go skiing?" or "What about a grill?" . That is why I felt that he is the most sincere and open one. And he was like that from the very beginning. He did not want to prove his Romanianity and he did not deny it,

either. He always said what he felt, he accepted liking Switzerland when many other members were obstinantly protecting Romania. He admitted that Romania is his past and Switzerland is his life right now. As far as his involvement is concerned, although he did not want to be part of the organisation, he is now administrator of the forum. Somehow, for him things happen naturally.

In conclusion... is ethnicity something that has to do with time? Can it be differentiated according to time? Can it depend more on the past than on the present and future? Can it change in time, be perceived differently? Or is it a continuous thing that always stays the same? I believe that ethnicity does depend on time. I believe that it can be more intense or actually ignored according to time and space. And I believe that people can make it be more vivid, more alive. Culture, language, religion, traditions can be alive or they can be given life from time to time, as I think diasporic communities, as Karim also showed, do. And this happens through meetings, media, events. People have this special capacity of taking with them time, as it is and with everything it means.

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