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# COMMEMORATING A HISTORICAL DAY: JANUARY 24<sup>th</sup> IN THE ROMANIAN NEWSPAPERS

Case study

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## Keywords

Commemoration  
Commemorative journalism  
The framing theory  
Media frames

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## Abstract

*Commemorative journalism has become a key element in shaping the national identity, as well as in keeping and preserving the collective memory of a community or nation. This article analyzes, by means of the framing theory, the way that written press reflected over a 3 years period, between 2009 and 2011, the process of commemorating the Romanian Principalities Union Day. The research focused on January 24th due to its great importance to the Romanian's history, both from a political and an identity perspective. The analysis showed that 19 frames were used in relation to this commemoration, almost half of the articles employing political related frames and proving that media didn't focus on the historical data or commemorative rituals, but rather on the political confrontations and debates.*

In a period when collaborative nationalism is quickly advancing, concepts such as national identity, collective memory or nation seem to experience difficult times. Due to this process of redefining identities and to the necessity of consolidating them, the commemoration phenomenon greatly expanded during the last decades. Commemorations, history and returning to the past means for communities a way of fighting and diminishing the feeling of losing one's roots, one of the effect of the globalization phenomenon.

Commemorations are ritual actions that take place in the public space. Their meaning is remembering an important event, historical character or a group of persons for a country or community. Thus "commemoration lifts from an ordinary historical sequence those extraordinary events which embody our deepest and most fundamental values" (Schwartz, 1982, p. 377).

The commemorative actions are both social and political „for it involves the coordination of individual and group memories, whose results may appear consensual when they are in fact the product of processes of intense contest, struggle, and in some instances, annihilation" (Gillis, 1994, p. 5). Thus, commemorations represent an important element in constructing collective memory and, as Andreas Huyssen notes "remembrance as a vital human activity **which** shapes our links to the past, and the ways we remember **them** define us in the present. As individuals and societies, we need the past to construct and to anchor our identities and to nurture a vision of the future" (Huyssen, 1993, p. 249–61).

One of the founders of the religion studies, the French sociologist Émile Durkheim concludes in his study *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (2005), that the meanings of the past are maintained and renewed through periodic commemoration rites. Thus, we can notice that commemorations are presented everyday in media throughout a calendar including the most important events which took place on that day and the names of the main historical characters that were born or died that day. This is the simplest form of commemorative journalism, the relation between mass media and commemoration being much deeper than that.

Catherine Bell (1997) noticed that in this era of communication and technology, it is impossible for the rituals not to be affected by media in what concerns the way of living and understanding them, and also in the way they are structured (the example of live ceremonies directed not only for the participants, but also for the thousands of TV home viewers). Commemorative journalism has a role that is extremely important in shaping the way communities and nations understand, accept and remember their own past, becoming during the last decades a key element in

shaping the national identity, in keeping and preserving the collective memory and the common history. James Carey (1989, 1997) underlined that the function of journalism is not just the act of spreading some information, but that of bringing together those who share the same beliefs and connecting them in a sacred ceremony.

Thus, journalists, who are direct witnesses to some important historical events, are considered to be commemorative agents (Zelizer, 1992) and media becomes a „depository" of the collective memory, the past being „one of the richest places available to journalists to explain the present day events" (Zelizer, 2008, p. 82).

Some researchers and historians do not accept or recognize the value of commemorative journalism. They consider that it has a pure commercial purpose, that of attracting an audience as large as possible. Referring to the United States, Carolyn Kitch (2000) presents the fact that in 1998, three of Time's four top-selling issues ever were cover stories on celebrity deaths. "That very popularity, however, suggests that this form of journalism is deeply meaningful to readers. Even as a commodity, an object bought and sold, the magazine has social value to those who hold it and save it, and who believe and remember the story it tells. The media mourning of a major figure is more than just a report of news; it is itself part of 'the news' and of the 'history' of American culture" (Kitch, 2000, p.189).

For this research I chose January 24<sup>th</sup> due to its great importance to the Romanian's history, as it represented an extremely important moment from a political and social point of view, but also from an identity perspective. January 24<sup>th</sup>, 1859 was a key moment for our history, the moment when "a new and better era for the development of our state and people began" (Giurescu, 1966, p. 142), being the real moment when Romania entered modernity, the moment "of our national awakening" (Bulei, 1982, p. 36).

Such a day deserves a commemoration respecting its importance because a commemorative action "reminds or teaches group members about past events in part by connecting the events to the group's present identity; and second, it lends moral weight to those events. [...] On the one hand, commemoration may serve as a source of information that increases public *knowledge* about a past event. On the other hand, commemoration may influence the public's *judgment* about the events which are worth remembering" (Corning & Schuman, 2013, p. 434 - 435).

Equally, a research made after the commemorative events organized in 2011 on the Romanian Principalities Union Day showed that discussions on this topic come back "on the occasion of celebrations when great public

processions are organized and people celebrate a ritual of identification and revival of symbolic feelings related to patriotism as an integrated structure of values which generates privilege to the favorable attitude towards the nation, the country and common values in the patriotic discourse” (Dâncu, 2011, p.2)

Finally, the first year of the research, 2009, marked 150 years since the Union of the Romanian Principalities, moment which should have been honored with special ceremonies. The analysis was based on the framing theory. Framing means choosing and presenting one of the many angles comprised by a topic. A frame „is a central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration” (Tankard et al, 1991, p. 11). The framing chosen for a certain topic tells about the controversy, the essence of the problem (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987).

The way a certain topic is framed into news is very important because its role is to draw (and many times to impose) the image that the public has about certain events. In other words, the angle chosen by the media to present commemoration is the one that puts its fingerprint on the mind and memory of the audience.

Concerning frame analysis and identification ways, these continue to be widely disputed by researchers. Every method has its advantages and disadvantages. „The frame manifests itself in media content through various framing devices, such as word choice, metaphors, exemplars, descriptions, arguments, and visual images. [...] These devices are held together under the heading of a central organizing theme—that is, the actual frame, which provides the frame package with a coherent structure” (Van Gorp, 2007, p. 64).

Claes De Vreese (2005) refers to two types of approaches that can be used in studies about media framing:

1. The deductive method is about using a general set of existing frames, no matter what the topic might be. To this respect, many of the researches follow the line drawn by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), the predefined frames being „conflict”, „responsibility attribution”, „economy”, „human interest” and „morality”. The method was criticized because it didn’t offer the possibility of identifying new frames which can be more relevant to the respective topic.
2. The inductive method is about generating a new set of frames, specific to a certain topic. One of the advantages of using the inductive method is that researchers can particularly analyze an event, with a high degree of distinctiveness. At the same time, this was also the criticism towards the inductive method, the fact that these frames are hard to use in other researches.

In this case, I used both approaches, but I will present the results of the inductive method because the deductive one didn’t seize in depth the commemoration problem and, consequently, wouldn’t have offered relevant results. Taking into account the expansion of the commemoration phenomenon and the rising interest of researchers towards this topic, I think that the frames discovered within this research could be later used in any study on commemoration topics.

Considering the deeply abstract nature of the frames, this research implied both a quantitative and qualitative content analysis. The media frames were identified using the analytical content indicators suggested by James W. Tankard (2001). He elaborated an exhaustive list containing 11 elements of frame identification in news: titles, subtitles, pictures, photo captions, leads, source selection, quotes selection, quotes from polls, logos, statistics and tables, paragraph and final declarations. This research takes into account textual elements and not the visual ones, analyzing the titles, initial paragraphs and quotes and final paragraphs and declarations.

In what concerns the sampling, the research focused on analyzing articles that dealt with the Romanian Principalities Union Day. For the research corpus, I chose 3 newspapers with national distribution: *România Liber*, *Adevrul* and *Jurnalul Național* (the on-line versions). I chose these newspapers due to the large number of subscriptions and to the fact that they are considered quality papers and not tabloids. For a greater relevance of the results, I chose to analyze the articles published on January, 24<sup>th</sup> and the articles published one day before (January, 23<sup>rd</sup>) and one day after the events (January, 25<sup>th</sup>).

In this research I applied the content analysis for a total of 83 articles referring to the United Principalities Day.

A pure quantitative analysis shows that the greatest interest for this day was shown by *Adevrul* newspaper. Out of 83 articles published during three years, more than half (44 articles) were published in this newspaper. *România Liber* published 26 articles, while *Jurnalul Național* only 13. Regarding the article types, the analysis showed that simple news was predominant (63 out of 83 articles). During the three years, each newspaper published two documentaries about the commemoration of the United Principalities Day.

The 2009 – 2011 was a period marked by a great turmoil for Romania. Electoral stakes bring about strong clashes between government and opposition, austerity measures imposed by the economic crisis are announced, the government is dismissed and new political alliances are born. All these conflicts have influenced the media reports on the commemorative events. Thus, the smallest number of articles was published in 2009, the

moment which marked 150 years since the Union of the Romanian Principalities, even though it should have been a special celebration reflected in a greater number of articles.

Regarding the media frames, the analysis showed that 19 frames were used in connection with the commemoration of the Little Union Day.

### **The media frames typology:**

#### **I. Frames with political topic:**

- Government-opposition conflict - 8.40%
- Political accusations - 8.40%
- Patriotic-like political statements - 8.40%
- Stolen commemoration - 2.40%
- Disinterest of politicians - 1.20%
- Despise towards politicians - 2.40%
- Booed politicians - 15.60%

#### **II. Frames that show the event type:**

- Commemorative description - 10.90%
- Beans parade - 1.20%
- Popular celebration - 9.60%
- Cultural manifestations - 15.60%

#### **III. Other frame types:**

1. Interest of the population – 6% vs. disinterest of the population - 6%
2. Poor quality commemorations – 3.60% vs. High quality commemorations - 1.20%
3. Identity symbols - 1.20%
4. Lack of national unity - 1.20%
5. Historical data about the event - 9.60%
6. State of the monuments - 4.80%

### **The „commemorative description” frame**

It refers to articles mainly aiming at describing official commemorative events which took place on the occasion of the Small Union. It describes religious services, the intonation of the national song, hailing the flag, torch defilations or wreath layings. The tone used by journalists in this frame was a solemn one, according to solemn significance of the ceremonies. This frame, which presents the public commemorative events, represents only 10.90% of the total articles about the United Principalities Day (compared to 46.80% represented by frames with political subject), which proves that the attention of the press wasn't focused mainly on commemorative rituals.

Articles in this frame category can be found in each of the three years and the descriptions and details presented are similar, both within the three newspapers and also from one year to another. This frame was built through leads as well as through final paragraphs:

*The event will start with the reading of the text “The 1861 Proclamation – the official recognition of the Union” by master Petric Ciubotaru from Ia i International Theatre. During the second part of the manifestations, officials will go to Trei Ierarhi church to lay wreath to the tomb of Al. I. Cuza. The day will end with the military*

*ceremonial of torch defilation and a concert given by tefan B nic jr., Loredana Groza and Morandi, events that will take place in the evening. Adev rul, January, 24<sup>th</sup> 2009*

### **„Cultural manifestation” frame**

Expositions, book presentations, symposiums, all these cultural events and similar ones represented 15.60% of the articles about the United Principalities Day. They were present in all analyzed years, which proves not only that such events were organized in all political contexts, but also that the press still pays some attention to the cultural-artistic manifestations, even if in a lower degree than to the political events. Presentation in media of this type of non-conflictual manifestation represents in fact an alternative to the domination of politics.

*New expositions at Union Museum in Alba Iulia.*

*The local administration, together with the National Military Museum in Bucharest and the National Union Museum in Alba Iulia organize during January 23<sup>rd</sup> and February 15<sup>th</sup> the temporary exhibition “Let’s shake hands”. The manifestation is dedicated to the celebration of 150 years since the Union of the Romanian Principalities, Moldavia and Wallachia. On this occasion, the public will have the opportunity to see documents, photos and objects that remind the personality of Alexandru Ioan Cuza. România Liber , January, 24<sup>th</sup> 2009*

### **„Historical data” frame**

Historical themes have a special significance because, as Anderson underlined in his *Imagined communities* (1991), the use of historical subjects offers a common experience as time passes by. Articles included in the category “historical data”, almost 9.60%, presented several details related to the Small Union. The accent was placed especially upon the description of several important characters of that time, who in one way or the other contributed to the Small Union. The process of framing building starts with the title, with a direct reference to the name around which the article would be built (*Who was really Alexandru Ioan Cuza, România Liber , January, 24<sup>th</sup> 2011, Was Cuza-Vod freemason? Jurnalul Na ional, January, 24<sup>th</sup> 2010*), and, in continuity, the frame is built up through initials paragraphs, which begin the description of that historical character:

*The 1859 Union represents one of the most important events in Romanian history and Alexandru Ioan Cuza is considered to be the one who built the foundation of the modern state. Historians agree that the image of Cuza perceived by the large public is cut off the literature books but the reality is far more complex. România Liber , January, 23<sup>rd</sup> 2009*

This media frame proves again that commemoration is an interactive process, an important piece of collective memory which gives present meaning to past events and brings it back to popular consciousness.

### “Popular celebration” frame

Commemoration is a ritual with a double nature, one official and one of entertainment (Connerton, 1995), proved also by the fact that the popular celebration has the same percentage as historical date, 9.60% and almost the same as the commemorative ceremonies. This shows that the official events were almost always followed by popular parties, characterized by joy and fun.

An interesting detail is that this frame was presented only in the newspaper *Adev rul*. Articles in this category have described especially the folk music shows organized on the Small Union’s Day and the main actors were folk bands or singers. The frame is build mainly through the leads:

*On the Union Day, an event that is celebrated every year on January 24<sup>th</sup>, the residents of Galati can enjoy a concert at the "Nae Leonard" Musical Theatre. Tomorrow you will see, at 17.00, the performance of the three famous Romanian folk music singers. We're talking about Maria Dragomiroiu, Stefania Rares and Gheorghe Turda. The show is entitled "Let have a big hora (Romanian round dance)". Adev rul, January, 23<sup>rd</sup> 2011*

### Political media frames

Commemorations are rituals charged with symbols through which the past is celebrated, but at the same time they are also political actions with many implications for the present political games. In this regard, political frames are dominant in the media reports referring to the commemorative events organized on the United Principalities Day, representing 46.80%. This high frequency proves that commemorative actions dedicated to the Small Union are highly politicized and, although the subject of remembrance lies in the past, the reasons for commemorating can be found in the present. Therefore, often commemorative actions should not be viewed "simply as expressions of Durkheimian social solidarity, but also as political project whose goals is to cultivate and promote specific understandings of the past as part of an-ongoing political agenda" (Roudometof, 2003, p. 163).

### Patriotic-like political statements frame

8.40% of the articles on the Principalities Union Day fell into the patriotic-like political statements category. Unlike media frames such as booed politicians, political accusations and Government-opposition conflict, which were found only in 2011, patriotic-like political statements could be found mainly in 2009 and 2010. This

proves that during the two years, commemorative events have been a good opportunity to make such statements since they were not marked by other political incidents that would receive more attention. In this respect, Eva-Clarita Onken (2007, p. 24) notes that „for the political actors in democratic states, commemoration days provide the opportunity to demonstrate political positions and to discuss different perceptive standpoints. Moreover, the official appearance of politicians and heads of state on such days is often used to strengthen a country’s profile and reputation vis-a-vis its neighbors and the outside world in general”. Thus, in the statements of both the power and opposition politicians made on the Principalities Union Day, also in 2009 and in 2010, the emphasis falls on the idea of unity and that working together, politicians and common people can overcome difficult moments. Therefore the unfavorable political context comes out again through means of media framing.

*I am certain that we can get through this period, much easier than other European countries. We need one thing: solidarity. The solidarity between the people and the political class. We need sacrifices of those who represent the political elite", said the president. Adev rul, January 24<sup>th</sup> 2009*

*"We will have to go together through this crisis regardless of the party we represent. God help us and give us the strength to live through the crisis as a truly united nation" said Mircea Geoana, President of the Senate. Adev rul, January 24<sup>th</sup> 2009.*

Mihai Coman (2008) defines this phenomenon as "extreme media coverage" of the political life which may have some advantages, but also disadvantages. The good parts consist of the fact that the politicians are bound "to always communicate with the public, to explain or to justify their acts, to constantly feel "under the control" of those who voted them" (Coman, 2008, p. 230). At the same time, extreme media coverage can have negative effects because it "exaggerates the persuasive dimensions of the political communication act, it promotes some leaders who sometimes are just media figures, it eludes some important issues through rhetorical and acting tricks, it dramatizes the participation in political life - finally, leading to the altering of rational arguments to emotional ones "(Coman, 2008, p. 231).

### The booed politicians, political accusations and Government-opposition conflict frames

"If we look on a political leader’s agenda, we find that an important part of his work is related to the rites. And mainly, to two of its distinct forms which are grand openings and commemorations, modern versions of propitiation and redemption

rites" (M. Abélès, 1989, p. 130 apud Coman, 2008, p. 253).

The three frames could be found in articles from 2011, they are interconnected, and their appearance was determined by the political context of the moment. President Traian B sescu was booed during the ceremonies organized both in Iasi and Focsani. Representatives of the Democratic Liberal Party (PD-L) have accused their opponents of orchestrating the events, while opposition leaders have responded by launching other accusations against government representatives. The press recorded all the harsh allegations and presented them in the articles about Principalities Union.

The first way to build the three frames was through the titles, all of them containing the elements of conflict that characterized the entire situation. Very used were the quote-titles (*Antonescu about the booing in Iasi: A reaction of some people "mocked and treated like parasites" România Liber*, January, 24<sup>th</sup> 2011// *Udrea: What happened in Iasi seems a histrionic act; I heard specific Ponta and Antonescu slogans. România Liber*, January, 24<sup>th</sup> 2011) or defective predicate titles (*The national boo Day – Adev rul*, January, 24<sup>th</sup> 2011// *B sescu, booed also in Focsani – Adev rul*, January, 24<sup>th</sup> 2011)

The booed politicians, political accusations and Government-opposition conflict frames were also built in initial paragraphs, using the quotes that have developed the idea of conflict first presented in the titles. These three media frames showed what happened during the commemorative ceremonies in Iasi and Focsani and rendered the views of both the power and opposition leaders:

*The strict security measures taken before the events dedicated to the celebration of The Small Union in Iasi showed that the Presidency, as well as the local authorities were expecting public protests to take place. But their expectations surpassed any imagination. The minute B sescu got out of the car and appeared in The Union Square, the choir of remonstrators has not stopped. Even the opposition was surprised by the magnitude of the booing. Jurnalul Național, January, 24<sup>th</sup> 2011*

*The PNL leader, Crin Antonescu stated on Monday, in Iasi, after the events organized in Union Square, where President Traian B sescu was booed by the crowd, that no one has brought people there to protest and that was a normal reaction of "the mocked citizens", according to Mediafax. România Liber*, January, 24<sup>th</sup> 2011

Another important element in the building of the booed politicians frame was presenting the readers the slogans shouted by the public during the commemorative events:

*The minute he set foot out of the car, the choir of the invectives has started. "Huo, liar, thief, we want your resignation" are only part of words shouted at him. But there were even harsher ones: "You sold the country", "B sescu divides, Cuza was the Great", "B sescu the enemy". Jurnalul Național, January, 24<sup>th</sup> 2011*

*The public, most of them retired soldiers, chanted slogans such as "Thieves!" and "Down with B sescu". Some of the demonstrators against B sescu even threw snowballs at him. Adev rul, January, 24<sup>th</sup> 2011.*

### **Stolen commemoration frame**

We have already emphasized that politics takes over both the commemorative actions and the press coverage of the celebrations. "News stories, then, become a forum for framing contests in which political actors compete by sponsoring their preferred definitions of issues" (Carragee & Roefs, 2004, p. 216). This media frame is a reflection of the fact that the journalists saw and pointed out the confiscation of the commemorative significance and at the same time, expressed disdain for politicians who use commemoration for their own interest and gain.

An important aspect is that the frame appears in all three years analyzed (2009, 2010, 2011) and is found mostly in editorials. Each article was influenced by the political context of the moment, and each year, columnists have expressed their contempt by adopting an ironically and quizzical tone. In 2009, an election year, the author of an article mocks the politicians for their so called interest in taking part in the commemorative events held in Iasi:

*These days, Ia i became a pole of attraction for politicians. Old and young, all but the kitchen sink, the political party, the government, everyone has ditched the affairs of the country and took the road to be present at the big event of the year, the great feast of Iasi, the celebration of the union of political party affairs, in a national brotherhood. Driven by the „advertise at any cost” trend, after they promised not to politicize the celebration of the Union, they’ve thought: better to be seen there as one can never know.*

### **Conclusions**

Considering the strong connection between history, commemoration and collective memory we have considered relevant to the topic the commemorative description frame, the historical data frame and the identity symbols frame. These are the most important frames that media has used to present to the public how The Small Union Day was commemorated. Together, the three have represented 21.60% of all articles, while the articles containing political frames were

46.80%. The percentage is more than double and the difference is overwhelming. It can be concluded therefore that the media attention was not focused on presenting the true commemorative ceremonies even though this is a ritual which has an extremely important function in enforcing the collective identity feeling (Kertzer, 2002), as well as in maintaining and propagating the collective memory of a nation. The articles didn't concentrate on the historical moment either, on its significance or even on the historical figures that have influenced the Small Union Day, but the political conflicts and contexts have completely captured the presentation of commemorations in the written Romanian press.

Thus the commemoration of January 24<sup>th</sup> appears as one highly politicized, emphasizing once again the idea of other commemoration studies that "the politics of the present not only shapes the representation, but often entails the misrepresentation of the past" (Brubaker & Feischmidt, 2002, p. 701). Moreover, politicians seem to be present to all the commemorative actions, proving that they understand and speculate the influence that these ceremonies have on their public image.

All political frames media and the way they were built sustain the idea that the commemoration process is influenced by the interests of the present politics, media frames such as booed politicians, government-opposition conflict and political accusations being all the result of the political context. Moreover, the celebration of 150 years of the Small Union in 2009 was reflected in the media with the lowest number of articles throughout the period analyzed and the reason was, again, a political one: 2009 was an election year and media attention turned in that direction. Thus commemoration is, indeed, an active process, "not a simple matter of retrieving information and to remember is to place a part of the past in the service of conceptions and needs of the present" (Huyssen, 1982, p. 374).

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