

Defending Romanian Identity and Specificity through Hip-Hop: Message to Europe

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Abstract: *It is a known fact that national culture and its subculture components are everything but static elements. Romanian hip-hop has so far made itself known to voice what it sees as being wrong, in any and all aspects of social, political, cultural and private life. Thus, when a nation-wide important change occurs – such as the recent EU integration – hip-hop artists turn into defenders of the national identity and culture, urging the whole of Europe and even Romanians themselves to think twice before forming an opinion about a whole nation – such as mistaking Romanian gypsies for the Romanian people. The cultural consequences of this fresh new trend in society are interesting to say the least.*

Key-words: *Romanian hip-hop, subculture, national identity, national culture*

Hip-hop in Romania is not known for being generally praised or remembered in good name. It is known for being criticised, censored, banned from the market or protested against. Radio stations rarely play hip-hop songs, television stations are forced to censor them – and thus one gets to hear pertinent lyrics like “stay away from drugs and guns” under the form of “stay away from ... and ...” – authorities have tried several times to stop certain albums from being published and even to ban them from the market.

Yet this type of music has flourished, growing in about 15 years from a thing of the underground to a nation-wide industry, with a stable community and real fans. It has fed and thrived on most of its original influences, but also on Romanian cultural specific elements to the point of emerging as a stand-alone music genre, rapidly growing in popularity all over the country. Only this time it is not about the underground. Although censorship is still being exercised, more and more people of all ages and social conditions are beginning to listen to this type of music and Romanian hip-hop groups are collaborating with TV stations in order to promote national culture and history.

Obviously, such a rise in the hip-hop phenomenon demanded that the music itself shape and polish its own style and more importantly, its own message for its listeners. Which it did, a fact proven – among other facts – by the rapidly growing features on Romanian hip-hop albums by similar renowned groups from abroad, which seem to be taking more and more interest in the Romanian hip-hop scene – such as affiliates or members of Wu-Tang Clan from the United States (Killarmy, Shabazz the Disciple or Raekwon the Chef) or Texta, one of Austria’s most prominent hip-hop groups.

When judging hip-hop as an attitude, one can easily notice that one of the main features of its style is creating political, social and cultural manifestos which voice whatever the artists see as being wrong in Romanian society on every level, from government laws to life in the streets and from religious flaws to marriage problems. Their language is harsh, sometimes downright obscene, and the tone ranges from slightly ironical to outbursts of savage criticism burying everything the artists deem fit for burying. However, they do not do so for the sake of doing it; they seem to be using the freedom of speech right granted by democracy to say what the average Romanian does not dare say about many of the topics considered taboo in Romania, with Paraziții’s *Jos cenzura!* / *Down with censorship!* being one of the best examples.

This tendency has brought them to the point of being the unofficial spokesmen for the people, many of the most important hip-hop artists being considered leaders of opinion among their fans and in the hip-hop community in general. And if we are not sure that this path has been or is being followed by all the Romanian hip-hop groups, we are positive that the two most important groups which have started this trend – and which are largely considered to be

the best hip-hop groups in the country – namely Paraziții and B.U.G. Mafia, still have a lot to say on the subject, as we will see further on.

There is one thing which does not seem to have been anticipated by anyone involved in the hip-hop business, as the idea of hip-hop artists as leaders of opinion has backfired, having a double impact. The messages sent by the artists to their fans have been well received and the hip-hop community has sent back waves of acceptance and gratitude, encouraging the groups to keep going. The result, as it is today, is a very close connection between the artists and their fans – the best hip-hop concerts to date in Romania have been organised in student campuses, on improvised scenes, without fancy lights or sound systems – with the artists being ever more receptive to what is going on around them and trying to play an active role in helping the average Romanian with their songs.

As we all know, national culture, and consequently its subculture components are everything but static elements, and are very susceptible to influences coming from nation-wide changes on whatever level of society or politics. One such nation-wide change is Romania's recent EU integration, with everything it brought about new, good or bad. The part which seems to be interesting enough – for fans and critics alike – is that some aspects of this integration have been chosen as topics for a fresh new trend in Romanian hip-hop.

Unfortunately, one of the negative aftermaths of this event has been the increasing exodus of Roma community members from Romania. The Roma community members have been causing trouble in most of the European countries for some years now, and their actions have done nothing but smear the name of Romania, pushing foreign mass-media channels to go as far as calling Romanians names, with the first one being of course “gypsies”, regardless of the fact that in Romania only 1.5% of the population belong to this ethnic minority.

While in the last period of time many voices, either Romanian or foreign, have stood up to defend the name and the image of the Romanian people as opposed to the gypsy minority, trying to make people understand that there is no resemblance between the two nations, except the fact that Roma community members are an ethnic minority living in Romania, too few of these voices have really succeeded in getting their message through. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the same voices have considered everything as being the authorities' fault, because Romania is the only country in Europe whose government has recognised Roma community members as a minority and has granted them certain political and social facilities, such as allowing them to form their own political party or some other similar associations.

The element of surprise in this whole debate came from the Romanian hip-hop group Paraziții and from their last album, *Slalom printre cretini / Dodging Morons*. The first track on the album, entitled *Message to Europe*, has sent out shockwaves through the hip-hop community and beyond, becoming in less than a year probably the best known hip-hop song since B.U.G. Mafia's *Un 2 si trei de 0 / A 2 and Three 0*. The cause of this appreciation on a wider scale than usual – perhaps the widest scale that any Romanian hip-hop song has benefitted from – is related to its message which, as we have found out, was completely unexpected even for the best-informed fans.

Partially turning their attention from inner problems of the country, the group prove that they have not been criticising their country for so many years because they loathe it, on the contrary. *Message to Europe* is exactly what its title says it is, as Paraziții urge the whole of Europe not to mistake Romanians for Roma community members coming from Romania. This is the idea behind this song in a nutshell, a manifesto which turns out to be an exceptional achievement in more ways than one.

The idea that hip-hop is an attitude, a clear-cut message delivered with definite purposes, using music as a mass-media channel has never been truer than with *Message to Europe*. The rhythm seems rudimentary, reminding of the simple underground hip-hop beats

which are often exploited by commercial producers to reveal musical masterpieces, although certain well-timed scratches from FreakaDaDisk, the group's DJ and arguably one of the Romania's finest in the field, give it enough flavour to save it from critics when it comes to hip-hop sounds. The two emcees also sacrifice their rhythmic – the so-called “flow” which differentiates hip-hop artists from the point of view of proficiency – in order to deliver crystal clear words, spelled in a slower tempo than their usual technique portrays, paying close attention to separating the sounds, making the message easily intelligible and understandable by everyone who can understand Romanian. Furthermore, the chorus is missing completely, as the group sacrifices everything they can in their quest to make the message as obvious as possible, without any distractions or interruptions of any sort. But nothing is as important in their doing so than the tone and the language used.

First of all, the language benefits from the specific mark that Paraziții imprint on their songs and which many people – fans or not – have grown to appreciate. Mingling every register of the Romanian language, from frozen official expressions and elevated literary vocabulary, to the meanest and most obscene slang talk and curse words, the group have never ceased to amaze with ever-fresh puns and original ways of getting their message through. This song makes no exception. The perspective seems to be that of the average Romanian who proves to be not so average after all, being aware of everything that is going on around him, on a national and international scale, and knowing all there is to know about corruption in Romanian politics, or about the incessant trouble caused by Roma community members in Europe. However, these facts become insignificant when faced with the need to defend the Romanian national identity and specificity.

Yet perhaps the most interesting element of the song is the tone used. The group uses an ever-present general “we”, showing that they speak for the people, a fact which identifies them even further with the average Romanian mentioned above. Although mostly plain at first sight, without any specific inflexions to voice any particular state of mind, if combined with the message it portrays, and if this message is viewed from the point of view of a native Romanian, the tone is actually proven to range from indifference to anger and revolt, and from statements presenting nothing but the truth to savage outbursts of irony and sarcasm. And there is another aspect worth mentioning in this field; until the end of the song, the listener is given a glimpse of a sense of urgency, an urgency asking for acceptance on equal terms, which all Romanians long for. However, the tone grants no compromise, the average Romanian formulates his message in terms of equality, from one nation to others as equals in rights, and from this whole mixture between message, language and tone comes the true meaning of the song, not easily visible at first, and yet still ever-present. From its first word to its last beat, getting glimpses of its message across while making the difference between Romanians and the Roma community members from Romania, *Message to Europe* breathes equality, as it searches on behalf of the Romanian people the real acceptance within the EU spirit and common culture as a member on equal terms with all the other nations.

The song comes with a built-in antithetic construction following the pattern “what we don't do” as opposed to “what we do” and the other way round, as the lyrics are mostly split in two main categories: those depicting the gypsy lifestyle and their actions, as opposed to certain glimpses of the lifestyles of the Romanians and some of the things that are all-too familiar to the average Romanian. One may find in the lyrics as a whole a continuous mixture between the general and the abstract. On the one hand, there are references to general trends and features belonging to the different identities of the Roma community members and the Romanians, while on the other specific examples are portrayed, helping the listener get a better view. Even if this technique might seem a bit confusing at first, it only aids the song in achieving its ultimate goal, which is getting its message across as clearly as possible. The rest of the lyrics, which don't fit in this pattern governing the general layout, represent some

personal notes coming from the well-informed average Romanian, suggesting the fact that Romanians have their own ethical and moral code as a nation and a cultural identity, which drives them to have likes and dislikes about the EU, not only the other way round.

The song starts off with an announcement voicing the very title, after which there follows the first sequence about Roma community members and their deeds. The lyrics are pretty much self-explanatory, being an objective enumeration coming from a Romanian voice talking about gypsy acts:

<p>Mesaj pentru Europa: Nu suntem ciori, nu stăm în corturi, facem eforturi să ne elevăm Și nu cântăm pe străzi în Viena la acordeon Noi nu cerșim cu handicapu' la vedere să facem avere Și nu ghicim viitoru-n palmă, în dughene mizere Noi nu purtăm fuste-nflorate și nu furăm din buzunare Nu emigrăm în Suedia cu 7 copii să ne dați ajutoare</p>	<p>Message to Europe: We aren't crows, we don't live in tents, we make efforts to develop And we don't play the accordion in Vienna We aren't handicapped beggars set to make fortunes And we don't read your palm in dirty back street shacks We don't wear skirts with flowers and we're not pickpockets We don't emigrate to Sweden with 7 children to make you pay us child support</p>
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The Romanians' reaction to all this and the fact that they are mistaken for Roma community members comes in the following two lines, featuring the first personal outburst of criticism, referring to the Roma community members living in trailers near Rome and to the fact that there are no real Romanians among them. The curse words used suggest simply that Romanians have no desire whatsoever of being mistaken like this:

<p>Dați vina pe noi din Berlin în Pamplona, de-mi sare voma Mânca-mi-ați pula, n-o să găsiți un român în rulote la Roma</p>	<p>You blame us from Berlin to Pamplona, I feel like throwing up, Fuck you, you won't find a Romanian in trailers in Rome</p>
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There follows the first lines from the "what we do" part of the song, referring to the Romanian way of studying and facing life, only to be interrupted by another piece of criticism, this time regarding Romanian politics, lines which remind of the group's political manifestos. The sarcastic tone, also parodying some Romanian pop songs, urges the listener to realise that corrupt politicians should not represent Romania's identity as a nation, because they are unable to do so:

<p>Noi înghețăm în săli de clasă de la 6-7 ani (pula mea) 6-7 ore pe zi, fără căldură, mâncare și bani Avem părinți săraci acasă și-un lucru e sigur Ni se cultivă dorința de-a reuși în viață, de unul singur Ne confruntăm cu legi noi date de boi Dansează cu noi, valsul pulii mele e « un pas înainte, doi înapoi »</p>	<p>We freeze in classrooms since we are 6 or 7 (fuck you) 6 or 7 classes a day without heat, food and money We have poor parents at home and one thing's for sure We are being taught to succeed in life all on our own We face laws passed by morons Dance with us, my dick's waltz is "one step forward, two steps back"</p>
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Remembering corruption and broken politics only paves the way even further for the first sequence containing real and vivid attacks that the artists choose to launch against their first target of choice, namely tolerance taken to extreme, insulting gay people who show off in the streets and offering a solution to this, as simple as it is radical:

<p>Mă piș pe gay și nu-i normal ca copiii mei să vadă</p>	<p>I piss on the gay and it's not normal for my kids to see</p>
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Homosexuali care se ling în gură ostentativ pe stradă E la modă să fim toleranți, da' nu reînviem Sodoma Vă putem trimite bulangiii-n pachet la Barcelona	Homosexuals who lick themselves in the streets It's trendy to be tolerant, but we shouldn't revive Sodoma We can send you the fags packed to Barcelona
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The end of the first stanza brings about probably the most important lines in the whole song, summing up the whole intention behind the message to Europe. Aware that Romania is one of the poorer European “relatives”, the artists take into consideration the probability that Romanians will never receive equal rights and attention with the other countries, but they do not complain about it, simply taking it as it is. However, their message remains clear and unchanged, not accepting any type of compromise when it comes to mistaking Romanians for Rroma community members coming from Romania:

Suntem ruda săracă, deci nu putem fi frați Mesaj pentru Europa... cred că ne confundați!	We're the poor relative, so we can't be brothers Message to Europe: I think you're mistaking us for somebody else!
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The other stanza of the song takes the antithetic construction between Romanians and Rroma community members to the next level, making the mixture even more effective and integrating the “what we don't do” – “what we do” pattern in practically each line, or each two lines at most. The examples go on and touch many more aspects worth noting, like the comparison between Rroma community members who are dustmen and cleaners in Amsterdam, and Romanians who can speak three foreign languages and are considered among the best airplane pilots in the whole of Europe. This leads to the ironical side note that, despite all their cultural identity, Romanians cannot and will not socialise with dumpsters, if they continue to be mistaken for Rroma community members. The choice of language and examples shocks the listener by putting together words like “whores” and “theatres” as the song unfolds towards its climax at the end:

N-avem șapte frați acasă, mama chiar nu e bolnavă Tata și-a băut rapid cafeaua și-a plecat la muncă-n grabă Facem facultăți și dăm pe cărți ultimul ban N-o să fim vreodată gunoieri la Amsterdam Vorbim trei limbi și vă putem conduce avioanele Dar nu putem în pula mea socializa cu tomberoanele Forțăm uși închise, trăim cu vise nepermise Și muncim legal un an pentru un pumn de fise Bagă la cap repede, crede-ne, noi nu mâncăm lebede Ne respectăm, ne rezolvăm singuri problemele Javrele și curvele în Madrid vă-ngroașă șatrele Noi românii stăm la rând să umplem teatrele	We don't have seven brothers at home, mom really isn't sick Dad drank his coffee quickly and left to work in a hurry We have university degrees and spend our last penny on books We'll never be dustmen in Amsterdam We speak three languages and we can pilot your planes But we can't fucking socialize with garbage bins We force closed doors, we live on forbidden dreams And we work legally for a bunch of coins Get it through your head, trust me, we don't eat swans We have respect for ourselves, we solve our problems on our own The assholes and the sluts in Madrid increase the gypsy communities We, Romanians, stand in line to fill up theatres
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The last lines present an original view of the average Romanian on politics and corruption, along with everything they are. Admitting of voting in disgust after having lost the hopes for anything better, the authorities are accused of purposefully letting the country fall to ruin in order to lower the prices for foreign investors, so that they may steal large amounts of money from the EU funds which are said to be used in public and social purposes, and which actually end up in private villas or fake technologies. This leads to the ironic ending of the song, with a rhetorical suggestion coming from that average Romanian, featuring a hidden

comparison between the nowadays general state of things and that portrayed in one of the masterpieces of Romanian literary creation, the bleak, moody novel *Pădurea spânzuraților* by Liviu Rebreanu. The cultural specific element arrives just in time to end the song and leave its echoes trail off in the minds of its listeners, as a scratch by FreakaDaDisk brings in the background the same line from one of Paraziții's earlier song played over and over again a couple of times, gaining a new stylistic dimension under the light of the new song it ends:

<p>Votăm în scârbă e adevărat și țara-i praf, pulbere fină Căci e mai ieftin să dai banu' jos când cumperi o ruină Banii pe 10 ani de la UE dispar în vile În străzi inexistente și tehnologii inutile Dac-avem pile, băi cârnaților, pardon... băi fraților Putem cere detalii picante în Pădurea Spânzuraților. (Sunt inofensiv dar gândul meu e criminal...)</p>	<p>We're disgusted to vote, it's true, and the country's gone to fine dust 'Cause it's cheaper to pay good money on ruins 10 years' worth of EU money vanish on villas On inextant streets and useless technologies If we have connections, you assholes, excuse me,...my brothers We can request juicy details in The Hangmen's Forest. (I'm inoffensive but my thought is criminal...)</p>
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The video version of *Message to Europe* ends here; however, on the audio album, there is another excellently integrated episode which for most of the people who enjoyed this song represents the climax of the whole message, as it is laden with the true Romanian national spirit and wit, which can be felt by any native Romanian listening to this part. Following the tradition of a national and cultural identity with no problems whatsoever in establishing itself as independent and original, the average Romanian which has delivered his message in the two stanzas of the song turns to one of the mentalities passed down from ancient times: irony, but most of all self-irony in the face of harsh troubles. The hip-hop beats stop from playing, the oral monologue – spoken, not sung – is chosen as a means of expression, and the message is unmistakably Romanian in everything it is. The idea behind this part could be the fact that, after finishing his part in delivering the message of the song, the average Romanian realises that if *Message to Europe* did not manage to convince his fellow EU members of what he wanted to say, than nothing will, and he decides to offer an easier way out for everybody choosing not to spend the energy and time needed to understand the message of the song. The tone is specific to Romanian self-ironical episodes – calm, without any trace of emotional involvement – but there is a twist, namely that the calm tone is proportional with the intensity of the irony. The irreproachable politeness is very different from the violent outbursts of the song, and this makes it even more susceptible to add to the ironical charge and creates an unique experience which for a native Romanian – known by popular belief to be extremely polite when he's at his wits end, instead of raging uncontrolled – making one able to cry and laugh heartily at the same time. The words seem to be carefully chosen, giving the impression that there is no going around them, allowing no possible contradiction or analysis for the general image:

<p>Timpul s-a scurs pentru această prezentare, la final trebuie să precizăm că: România e o țară în Africa, noi trăim în găuri insalubre sub pământ, suntem canibali, vănăm șobolani cu arcu', n-avem mașini că ne deplasăm prin copaci vopsiți în galben, și toate construcțiile care le puteți admira dacă alegeți să faceți o excursie pe aceste meleaguri sunt construite de o civilizație superioară cu care noi nu avem nicio legătură. Vă mulțumim!</p>	<p>The time is up for this presentation, we must make one last remark at the end: Romania is a country in Africa, we live in dirty wholes underground, we are cannibals, we hunt rats by bow, we don't have cars as we move in trees painted in yellow, and all the constructions you can admire if you choose to visit these lands have been built by a superior civilization that has no connection whatsoever with us. Thank you!</p>
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In one of their earlier albums, on the song *Categoria grea / Heavyweight*, Paraziții mentioned that one of their goals would be to manage and release an album on a foreign

market or markets, a goal they're not very far from, considering the features on their latest album. What remains to be seen is the impact *Message to Europe* will have – if any – on other mentalities around Europe. Meanwhile, we are unaware if their goal has changed or not, but one thing remains certain: they have successfully fulfilled the role of defenders of Romanian identity and specificity through their music and – in the eyes of some, at least – are not far from being considered national heroes. Many Romanians, fans or not, have manifested their desire to see other hip-hop groups – or any musical artist for that matter – take the road started by Paraziții.

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