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Evaluation of controversial events and reaction to conflict in a multi-ethnic context

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ABSTRACT

After a presentation of the main theoretical and methodological aspects connected to the study of public outstanding events, from the perspective of the flashbulb memory (FM), we have proposed the methodology used in the study of FM for the study of the non-FM public events. Starting from these considerations we defined a design research, aims to analyze (a) how the social controversial events, symbol or climax of the interethnic conflict, are evaluated by the members of the ethnic groups in conflict and (b) what the relation between these evaluations is and the propensity of the subjects to react to similar conflicts. These analyses have used data collected from two relevant controversial events (symbol or sources of social conflicts), in two European countries (1003 Ss from Romania and Bulgaria) using the same methodology.

KEY TERMS: social memory, controversial events, interethnic conflicts, social attitudes

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While in today's world there is no open conflict, sources of social tension and conflict do persist in the European region. These sources are sometimes based on polarized, antagonistic representations when defining and remembering old or recent historical events involving groups that differ on ethnic, religious or political dimensions. The historical and social memory nourishes these tensions, which in turn may lead to open conflicts.

Many ethnic groups found themselves in conflict as a result of a history marked by tension and dramatic events. These controversial events and their resolution became landmarks in defining a group's identity and they are differently evoked and understood by each group that took part in it, usually on opposite sides. The process of sharing information and emotions about the dramatic events among group members may lead to polarization of the attitudes associated with a negative evaluation of the present social climate and of other groups (e.g., Brown, 1965; Isenberg, 1986; Pennebaker et al., 1997). Thus, collective memory about formerly opposing groups may be tightly connected to further social conflicts.

In the current study we describe (a) the way the controversial social events are evaluated by the members of the ethnic groups involved in the conflict and (b) the relation between these evaluations and the personal expectation to react to similar conflicts. These results are based on the data regarding collective memory about two different inter-ethnic conflicts that occurred in two East European countries (Bulgaria and Romania).

Conflicting events are likely to trigger the formation of flashbulb memories (Brown & Kulik, 1977, Conway et al., 1994; Finkenauer & Luminet 1998)). these types of memories appear when people are involved in or get into contact, for the first time, with a surprising, even shocking event, that is important in its consequences and/or is emotionally intense. Over the years, researchers have debated whether flashbulb memories (FM) are different from other types of episodic memory. Some authors consider flashbulb memories to be of unique type because people can remember, after years or tens of years, many details about both shocking events as well as the personal context when the first information about these events was received and assimilated (McCloskey, Wible & Cohen 1988; Neisser and Harsch, 1992; Bohannon, 1988; Christianson 1989). For example, regarding the terrorist attacks on September 11 in the USA, many of the people from different parts of the world remember many details referring to the sequence of these tragic events, as well as the personal context in which they heard about for the first time (Luminet et al., 2004). Even proponents of the flashbulb memory concept had a similar idea and considered that when strong, emotionally loaded events in the life of an individual take place, they are stored together with details about phony elements from their context. According to Brown and Kulik (1977), a memory is said to be flashbulb only when two conditions are satisfied: (a) information about the new event must be surprising and (b) it has to be perceived as having special importance/consequences for the individual's adjustment and security. These authors also postulate that the specific mechanism of flashbulb memory is different from the one corresponding to the shaping of common memories, leading to permanent

storage of the information captured by them (Brown & Kulik, 1977, Conway et al., 1994; Finkenauer & Luminet 1998).

Other authors have argued against the uniqueness of flashbulb memories. For instance, Neisser and Harsch (1992), in a study about the crash of the spaceship Challenger, found that very few of the 44 subjects who were tested again had flashbulb memories after a period of 32 and 34 months. Similarly, Bohannon (1988), in an study on flashbulb memory related to the same event, discovered that very few of the subjects (fewer than 35 %) tested again after 8 months proved to have real flashbulb memories. However, a review of these studies (Conway, 1994) suggests that the reason for the failure of finding flashbulb memories related to Challenger's explosion may be the fact that the surprise value and importance of this event was rather implied than measured. Therefore, it is likely that the low values of surprise and importance, associated with this event, explain the formation of subsequent flashbulb memories.

In an influential study, M. Conway (1994) manages a pertinent analysis, referring to flashbulb memory and proposes a research design meant to clear up numerous issues regarding classification of a memory as being of the flashbulb type. The study had in view the moment of Mrs. Margaret Thatcher's resignation from the position of Prime-Minister of Great Britain. The results have shown that formation of flashbulb memories about that event was related to high and moderate levels of *surprise and intensity* (the subcomponents of the *affect* variable), to moderate levels of *personal importance*, to high levels of *national importance*, to a moderate quantity of *previous knowledge* and to moderate levels of *interest* in politics. In contrast, formation of „non-flashbulb memory” was associated with moderate to low levels of *intensity of living* and of *personal*

importance, with moderate levels of *surprise and interest* in politics. To conclude, the subjects possessing flashbulb memories experienced the event more intensively, perceived it as being more *important*, *knew* more about Thatcher's administration and were more *interested in politics* than those having no flashbulb memory. Moreover, the group with flashbulb memories recalled the event more frequently and valued more the accuracy of remembered experience (Conway, 1994).

Conway's study (Conway, 1994) is the first attempt to statistically test the shaping and maintaining of flashbulb memories. According to C. Finkenauer and O. Luminet (1998) these models confer a marginal role to *emotions* and *recalling* in making and maintaining the memories of flash type. As many of the subjects involved in the study, conducted by Conway and his team, reported low values of memories about the event under discussion; the model, proposed by Martin Conway, assumes that repetition plays a crucial role in forming the flashbulb memories.

From a theoretical perspective on emotions, C. Finkenauer et al. (1998) noticed that the old models of flashbulb memory formation do not explicitly differentiate between the emotional value and disposition. As we have seen, Brown and Kulik (1977) supposed that the original event is unexpected, thus determining the subjective state of surprise. Moreover, they do not differentiate between the evaluation of the importance of the event and the intensity of the emotional state produced by it. On the other hand, Conway and his team do not take into consideration the evaluation of the novelty of the event and its personal importance which is supposed to determine the affective reactions. But, from their point of view, surprise and emotional state represent variables of a single latent factor ('affective reaction') (Conway, 1994).

In an attempt to use the differentiation of the concepts of proposed emotions, Finkenauer and Luminet (1998) built up a new model in which: (1) surprise is a consequence specific to the evaluation of novelty; (2) the intensity of the emotional state (what Conway, in 1994, tried to put into practice as affective reaction) is a general consequence of the evaluation process and in particular the process of evaluation of personal importance; (3) emotional surprise and disposition contribute in a different way to the formation of the flashbulb memories. Within this model *surprise*, *affective disposition* and *details referring to the original event* are the direct determinants of the flashbulb memories formation. The *surprise* variable is determined by the evaluation of the event novelty and the *details* variable referring to the original event and are conditioned by *rehearsal*, which, in its turn, is conditioned by the evaluation of the affective disposition provoked by the event and the actual *affective attitude* of the subject towards the past event. These last variables, in their turn, are conditioned by the *importance* given to the event (Finkenauer & Luminet 1998).

All the studies presented above used a methodology specific to analyze the impact of public events from the perspective of memory stability in time (FM or non-FM). A question arises whether the methodology for the study of FM is relevant for the study of non-FM of public events. Most of the previous studies put the accent on differentiating between FM and non-FM memories and identifying the mechanisms which allow the formation of the FM memories as well as on the variables with a significant influence on the formation of such memories. The memories referring to social events of a lower social impact but which make up the landmarks of the social memory collectivity are usually ignored in literature (Brown & Kulik, 1977, Conway et al., 1994; Finkenauer &

Luminet 1998). Moreover, there are diverse perspectives for analysis of the social memory events, besides the „cognitive” one presented above (Constantin, 2002, 2003, 2004). For example, from a ‘sociological’ perspective descending from Émile Durkheim (1973), the *social memory* refers to the social representations of the past, to the ones rooted in time, which is relatively stable, a little dependent on the characteristics of different social groups and placed closer to the historical representation of the past (Constantin, 2004). From this perspective, the investigation of social memory refers to the way the recent past is represented in the common perception of those who are witnesses to these events (they were contemporaries to these events) or the way they represent and symbolize the past by means of commemorative practices, traditions, rituals or other cultural symbols (museums, places, relics, etc.). A lot of studies (Shils, 1981; Ross, 1991; Pannebaker & Banasik, 1997; Igatua & Paez, 1997; Olick, J. K., 1998, 1999; Halbwachs, 1994; Hass & Jodelet., 1999, 2000; Jedlowski, 2001) within this framework have used a framework rather close to the anthropological or sociological approach, incompatible with the empirical psychological research. Unfortunately, the contact or « meeting » zone between the different perspectives in the social memory study (e.g. ‘sociological’ and “cognitive” perspective) is too scarce. We intend to extend this field and find out links between different perspectives of analysis of memory for social events. Our aim is to analyze controversial social events by using a methodology similar to that used in the analysis of flashbulb memories. We do not intend however to check for the existence of some flashbulb type memories, just to use the methodology developed in this field. For a recollection to be considered a flashbulb memory, in Conway’s (1994) opinion, it must involve not only a live quality accompanied by recall

of minutiae, but also preserve details of the reception events and remain unchanged over long periods of time. As we do not have the second evaluation of the same subjects after a delayed retest, we cannot define the flash or non-flash character of the memories generated by the events we investigate.

We are also not interested in the memory for the reception context as it is defined by O. Luminet (2004) as people's immediate memory for the circumstances in which they first heard some important news. We have taken into consideration the analysis of the differences between the evaluations made by the members of different groups in conflict, referring to the same controversial social event. The canonical variables, which proved to be related to the formation of some consistent memories in time, are also taken into account (Pillemer, 1984; Conway, 1994, 1995; Finkenauer et al., 1998; Luminet et al., 2000, 2004) but without any intention to check if the events generated are consistent and stable in time flashbulb-type memories. From this perspective, an important objective of the research is to check if the propensity to react to the interethnic conflict is connected to individual evaluation of the controversial social events.

In spite of different perspectives about the relationship between social memory, social identity and social conflict, many researchers agree that any social group can develop memories of their own past, memories which are distinctive from the ones of other groups (Lorenzi-Cioldi & Doise, 1994; Walton, 2000; Jedlowski, 2001). To distinguish itself from the other groups, the group extracted information from the near or remote past in order to constitute that collective memory is the central ingredient of the group identity. There is a direct and indissoluble link between social memory and social identity.

D. Paez and colleagues (1997), suggest that rehearsing and arguing about a relevant and conflict loaded event could provoke a polarization of social attitudes. If the individuals share more collective past events, then a polarization of attitudes will take place, because of the propensity to fit the event consistently into their social identity, thus reinforcing a positive or negative attitude toward a negative evaluation of the present social climate and the opponent group (Paez et al., 1997, p. 156). In this perspective, the conflict between groups leads to negative affective reactions which could maintain and increase the conflict itself. In spite of the multitude of opinions in defining and understanding the term “prejudice”, more and more authors consider it an automatic affective reaction toward out-group members (Fazio et al., 1995; Esses & Zanna, 1995). Immediately after the affective reaction toward the opposite ethnic group appears, the cognitive contents associated to the group are activated too. The stereotype and the prejudice represent the cognitive-affective foundation of inter-ethnic attitudes.

Starting from these considerations, we have decided to analyze whether the evaluation of the common controversial event by the members of two groups in conflict is related to the individual propensity to react to similar events or to the specific interethnic attitudes.

The aims of the study are as follows:

1. To compare the evaluations of a controversial social event (symbols or climax of a interethnic conflict), made by opposing ethnic groups. Two controversial events related to the ethnic conflict, which have taken place in two countries – Romania and Bulgaria – were chosen. These are the ‘*Târgu Mureș conflict*’ in Romania and ‘*Ethnic State Policy conflict*’ in Bulgaria (the opposing ethnic groups being Romanians vs Hungarians and

Bulgarians vs Turks, respectively). The general hypothesis here is that the controversial social events are evaluated differently depending on the ethnic origin of the subjects. We expect that the differences are due mainly to the „minority” or „majority” status of the diverse ethnic groups.

2. To investigate the relation between the evaluation of the controversial event and propensity to react to similar events in the future. The hypothesis is that the differences in the potential future reactions to similar events could be predicted by the current evaluation of the controversial event. We will perform this analysis separately for each country and group we collected the data from.

Methods

The research is of a *psychosocial inquiry* type, using a questionnaire. A *pre-test* referring to the specific national controversial event was done in each national context, (120 subjects per country). The participants were asked: a) to describe the most important episodes and/or moments of the specific conflict; b) to give the name of the most important event or moment of the conflict; c) to formulate sentences / assertions which better present what the other people think about the conflict, what their attitudes and opinions toward these kinds of conflicts are.

Using this information the event’s symbol or climax of each regional conflict was established, and the main research questionnaire was developed. We used similar research tools in investigating two concrete, real controversial events from each country.

Variables of interest

The questionnaire consists of several sections. In section 'A' information about the participants experience of the controversial /traumatic event was gathered. The Romanian sample was asked to think about '*The Târgu Mureş ethic conflict from 1990*' and the Bulgarian sample about '*The state policy of changing the names of the ethnic Turks*'. Both events are controversial /traumatic events, symbolic or climax of the each regional conflicts. After the introductory question ('*What are the words crossing your mind when you are thinking of 'The Târgu Mureş ethic conflict from 1990*' and '*The state policy of changing the names of the ethnic Turks*' respectively) all the following questions and scales were identical to all participants, irrespective of their country or ethnicity.

For the controversial event evaluation we used the flashbulb traditional 'canonic' variables proposed by others researchers: '*surprise*', '*intensity*', '*importance*', '*remembering*', '*personal context*', (Pillemer, 1984; Conway, 1994, 1995; Finkenauer et al., 1998; Luminet et al, 2000, 2004), '*social sharing*', '*sharing emotions*', '*following the mass-media*' (Finkenauer et al., 1998, Curci et al., Luminet et al., 2004). Some variables, relevant for event context analysis were added (Constantin T. 2004): '*autobiographical details*', '*event details*', '*others people's opinion*', '*other people's reactions*' '*other people's influence*'.¹

As far as 'accuracy' variables, the participants were asked for accurate information related to a controversial event: *place, date, and day of the week*. The answers were encoded with '- 1' for an incorrect answer, '0' for 'no answer or 'I don't know', '1' for a

partly correct answer, and '2' for a correct answer. Similar measures are used by Conway, (1994, 1995) and Luminet et al. (2000, 2004).

The personal predisposition to react to a similar event was measured on an 8-point scale. We used a hypothetical situation (*"If this conflict burst again and it is even more serious, what would you do to support your opinions and your sense of belonging to your ethnic group?"*), asking the participants to choose between several progressive reactionsⁱⁱ.

The ethnic attitudes were measured using an adaptation of a 'Nationalism-scale' proposed by B. Todosijević, (2001) This scale is already used in similar research in East European countries (former Yugoslavia and Hungary). The factor analysis of the data (from 17 items) received in our study revealed a three factor structure quite similar to the factors in B. Todosijević' research (2001): '*ethnocentrism*' (strong identification with the ethnic group, great importance of the ethnic identity and the necessity to support ethnic interests), '*ethnic attachment*' (positive feelings and attachment towards one's ethnic group and its traditions) and '*ethnic discrimination*' (demanding discriminative rights and requests for national closed-ness and exclusiveness). The reliabilities of these 3 subscales, assessed by Cronbach alpha coefficients is .81 for '*ethnocentrism*', .70 for '*ethnic attachment*' and .70 for '*ethnic discrimination*'.

Finally we asked for some socio-demographic information: *ethnic group membership, mother language, age, gender, domicile, educational level, incomes, religion etc.*

Procedure

The questionnaires were administered to two ethnic groups who were opposed during the conflict in both countries: Romanian ethnicity vs Hungarian in Romania and Turkish ethnicity vs Bulgarian Hungarian in Bulgaria. Almost all the participants live in multiethnic regions of the potential conflicts (Târgu Mureş region in Romania and Kardzali and Razgrad region in Bulgaria). All the participants completed a paper-and-pencil version of the questionnaire.

Participants

A total of 1003 participants (a convenient sample) from Romania (251 Romanian, 252 Hungarian) and from Bulgaria (331 Bulgarian, 169 Turks) were included in this analysis. The demographic characteristics of the sample are displayed in Table 1.

insert table 1 about here

Results

Controversial events evaluation

Generally speaking, the controversial event has had a strong impact on our participants. They experienced the event and the conflict very intensively; it was a great surprise for them. They believed it was insightful from both a personal and national importance. The reactions of the other people related to that event are also estimated as very intense.

insert figure 1 about here

Participants followed up the mass-media news, and shared their emotions and information about the event with other people (relatives, friends, colleagues, etc.). At the same time, they declared that relatives, friends, colleagues (personal context) had fairly similar opinions as their own and didn't try too much to change or influence their opinion about the significance of this event or its consequences.

To verify the first hypothesis, we analyzed the differences in the evaluation of each controversial social event, according to the 'minority' or 'majority' status of the investigated subjects. The comparative analysis shows that there are significant differences in evaluating the controversial events from all the variables taken into consideration ('Independent Sample t-test', $p < .05$). Participants having a "minority" status in their country (Turks and Hungarian), have been more strongly influenced by the controversial event. Two variables are an exception of that finding (there are no significant differences between the two groups). For the variable "other people's opinion" there are no significant differences ($F_{(2, 988)} = 44,31$, $p = 0,71$) across the two groups. For the variable of "national importance", the Ss' assessments are reversed: the „majority-status" participants >>>>evaluated<<<< the controversial event as being of greater national importance than the „minority-status" ones ($F_{(2, 979)} = 70,91$; $p = 0,01$).

insert figure 2 about here

So, the data from that phase of the study >>>>confirms<<<< our first hypothesis – the position in the society (minority vs majority) has a substantial impact on the evaluation of the controversial events. People in a ‘minority’ status have been more strongly influenced by the controversial event while those in a “majority” status, the level of impact was slightly weak.

Ethnic attitudes and personal predispositions to react to similar events

An adapted form of the ‘Nationalism-scale’ proposed by B. Todosijević (2001) assessing three different factors - *ethnocentrism*, *ethnic attachment*, and *ethnic discrimination* – were used to measure the inter-ethnic attitudes.

Using the *Anova One Way* statistical method and the Bonferroni contrast test, we identified significant statistical differences between the four ethnic groups, referring to interethnic attitudes. As a general propensity, ethnic Bulgarians and ethnic Hungarians had a higher level of ethnocentric attitudes, ethnic Turks an intermediate level and ethnic Romanians a lower level of ethnocentric attitudes for all three factors. These differences among the four ethnic groups are similar for an ‘*ethnocentrism*’ factor ($F_{(3, 855)} = 37.33$; $MSE = 2,334$; $p < .001$), for an ‘*ethnic attachment*’ factor ($F_{(3, 902)} = 29.88$; $MSE = 1,972$; $p < .001$) and for an ‘*ethnic discrimination*’ factor ($F_{(3, 895)} = 18.97$; $MSE = 1,620$; $p < .001$). However, the evaluation of the ethnic attitudes seems to suggest that the members

of the four ethnic groups have low levels of „hostile” inter-ethnic attitudes (the mean values are under 4 on a 7-points scale).

The personal predisposition to react to a similar event (‘animus’ variable) was measured on a 8-point scale, asking the participants to choose between several progressive reactionsⁱⁱⁱ. Using the *One Way Anova* and Bonferroni contrast test, low statistically significant differences were found between ethnic Romanians ($m_{Ro} = 3.16$) on one hand and ethnic Hungarians ($m_{Hu} = 3.60$) and ethnic Turks ($m_{Tu} = 3.77$) on the other hand, referring to the ‘animus’ variable (1 to 8 point scale). The Romanian results seem to have a lower level of predisposition in reaction to actively controversial conflict events.

The evaluation of ‘the predisposition in reaction to the similar event’ (‘animus’ variable) was distinguished by three different levels of potential reactions which were approved by the respondents:

- 25.6 % participants were considered approved with ‘*passive reactions*’ in the case when they declared both an intention ‘to do whatever’ (13.8%) and an intention ‘to complain by signing collective petitions’ (11.9%);
- 50.3 participants were considered approved for ‘*moderate reactions*’, if they declared an intention ‘to participate in peaceful demonstrations’ (30.2%) or ‘to convince or organize other people to protest’ (20.1%);
- 22.3% participants were considered approved for ‘*active or extremist reactions*’ in four cases: if they declared an intention ‘to participate in violent protest actions’ (12,3%), ‘to convince or organize people to participate in violent protest actions’

(3,1%), to be ready 'to participate in fights (war) if an armed conflict were to burst out' (5,6%) or to be ready 'to fight by all means, including sabotages, actions against civilians or partisan fighting' (1,4%).

Our aim was to reveal if there are differences between people who declare passive or moderate reactions and those that declare active or extremist reactions to similar traumatic events. Of course, in real ethnic conflicts, in an 'ecological' research situation, there are many variables that could influence personal reactions and decisions. We are aware that our participants were reluctant to declare their intentions to the full, especially those concerning the extremist actions. Nevertheless the expectation is that some differences could be figured out between people who have fewer chances to get involved in violent ethnic conflicts and those that have more chances to get involved in this kind of conflict.

In analyzing the differences between those who declare to have rather '*passive reactions*' and those who declare to have rather an '*active or extremist reaction*', few significant statistical differences were obtained ($p < .001$).

Generally speaking, people who declare to have rather '*active or extremist reactions*', in comparison to those declaring to have rather '*passive reactions*' could give more details describing the event ($m_1 = 3.09$, $m_3 = 3.68$), experienced it with greater emotional intensity ($m_1 = 3.31$, $m_3 = 3.78$), assessed the event as being both nationally and personally more important (respectively $m_1 = 3.22$, $m_3 = 3.81$ and $m_1 = 3.11$, $m_3 = 3.77$), assessed the reactions of other people as more intense ($m_1 = 3.75$, $m_3 = 4.11$), more frequently followed the information related to controversial events by watching news and

talk shows ($m_1 = 3.23$, $m_3 = 3.80$), more frequently shared information about events as well as their emotions related to it with the other people (respectively $m_1 = 3.04$, $m_3 = 3.92$ and $m_1 = 2.75$, $m_3 = 3.56$), assessed the event as more dramatic ($m_1 = 6.86$, $m_3 = 7.63$) and gave more accurate details about the controversial event ($m_1 = 3.40$, $m_3 = 4.06$). These respondents have a higher level of ‘ethnocentrism’ ($m_1 = 3.20$, $m_3 = 3.92$), ‘ethnic attachment’ ($m_1 = 5.14$, $m_3 = 5.75$) and ‘ethnic discrimination’ ($m_1 = 2.86$, $m_3 = 3.28$).

Controversial event variable as predictors for propensity to react to similar controversial events

To test the second hypothesis (if the differences in the potential future reactions to similar events could be predicted by different variables of a controversial events evaluation), a correlation and linear regressions analyses was conducted. Multiple correlations between the ‘animus’ variable and the indices of the controversial event evaluation are quite limited (between .100 and .304). Starting with the set of already found correlations within each ethnic group, a linear regressions analyses was done to check which of the variables could get into a predictive model for the propensity to react to similar controversial events. The predictive models for each ethnic group are valid ($p_{ANOVA} < .001$) but have a low predictive value (R Square and Adjusted R Square between .10 and .15; constant between 0.84 and 2.4 on 5-points scale). The predictive equations in each ethnic group are as follows:

- $animus_{Hu} = 1.8 + (0.31) \textit{ethnic attachment}$ ($R^2 = .10$; Adjusted $R^2 = .10$)
- $animus_{Ro} = 2.4 + (0.29) \textit{ethnic discrimination} + (0.28) \textit{event details} + (- 0.25) \textit{others opinion}$ ($R^2 = .15$; Adjusted $R^2 = .13$)

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- $\text{animus}_{\text{Bu}} = 0.84 + (0.31) \text{ social sharing} + (0.26) \text{ ethnic attachment}$ ($R^2 = .13$; Adjusted $R^2 = .13$)
- $\text{animus}_{\text{Tu}} = 1.9 + (0.30) \text{ national importance} + (0.29) \text{ sharing emotions}$ ($R^2 = .14$; Adjusted $R^2 = .13$)

According to these results, the Romanian participants would react actively or in an extremist way to controversial events similar to the ones in Targu Mures, if they are the people who ask for discriminative rights and requests for national closeness' and exclusiveness, retain more details connected to the controversial event and they perceive a similar opinion to the ones close to them (relatives, friends, colleagues etc.). Similarly it is more probable that the Hungarian participants would react actively or in an extremist way to similar controversial events if they have a high level of *ethnic attachment* (positive attachment and feelings towards one's ethnic group and its traditions). Referring to the other controversial event ('The state policy of changing the names of the ethnic Turks'), the Bulgarian participants seem to have the propensity to react to similar controversial events actively or in an extremist way, if they have frequently discussed the event with people close to them and if they have a high level of *ethnic attachment*. The ethnic Turkish participants instead tend to react actively or in an extremist way, mainly if they have given a greater national importance of the event and frequently shared their emotions about the event with other people.

The value of these predictive equations is reduced if their explicative force is taken into account. For example, for the equation obtained from the ethnic Bulgarians sample, Adjusted $R^2 = .13$ signifies the fact that the model explains only 13% of variance of a

propensity to react to similar controversial events. This means that the values given by these equations can be interpreted only as „propensity” and the consistency of these relations has to be checked in other similar studies. Although they have a reduced predictive value, it is clear that the prediction equations differ according to the ethnic status of the respondents (“Romanian, Hungarian, Bulgarian or Turk ethnicity”). Thus the hypothesis that the differences in the potential future reactions to similar events could be predicted by different variables of controversial event evaluations, which is confirmed, although at a low level of predictability.

Discussion

Although it was about two different controversial events, evaluated by members of different ethnic groups, they were evaluated quite similarly by the participants from the two countries. However, the events had a considerably greater impact with the ‘minority’ participants in comparison with those with a ‘majority’ status for most of the used variables. This can be explained by the fact that the minority status implies a more frequent impact of the social identity variables in comparison with the majority status. That is how we can explain a more active use of the information about the social identity in comparison with the majority status. As a result, there is a more frequent use of information about the significant events of social life, events that commemorate the ethnic identity or are a symbol of „threat” for the ethnic identity.

The evaluation of the ethnic attitudes seems to suggest that the members of the four ethnic groups have low levels of „hostile” inter-ethnic attitudes. For the factors associated with ‘*ethnocentrism*’ (strong identification with their own ethnic group, the importance of ethnic identity and the necessity to support ethnic interests)’ and ‘*ethnic discrimination*’ (demanding discriminative rights and requests for national closeness and exclusiveness) the mean values were under 4 on a 7-points scale. Only for the factor ‘*ethnic attachment*’ the means exceed the theoretical value of the scale (4 point), but this factor evaluated a „romantic” ethnocentrism (Todosijević B., 2001), as positive attachment and feelings towards one's ethnic group and its traditions. Although we have found significant differences between the three ethnic groups, these differences are quite small.

More discriminatory and useful for our purposes has been the 8-point scale for self-evaluation of one's personal way of reacting to conflicts similar to the controversial event under discussion. The analysis of the differences between those that declare to have rather ‘*active or extremist reactions*’, in comparison to those that declare to have rather ‘*passive reactions*’ seems to show that the former experience the event the more intensely people pay attention to it, remember more details, more frequently share information and emotions about the event and have an inter-ethnic ethnocentric attitude. However, the analysis of the correlations between these variables is weak, and the prediction models which resulted on the basis of these correlations, are relevant in its explanatory power.

We could however propose some explanations for these results. The first explanation is based on the idea that the analyzed controversial events, which happened 15 years ago, decreased in intensity along with time passing. In both countries (Romania and Bulgaria) there have not been other major incidents, although there still is certain concern or

tension about the inter-ethnic relation issue, maintained by several extremist political groups. This 'entry to normalcy' of the interethnic relationships, together with an intense political life with spectacular changes, have made the analyzed events stay the same without being reviewed or given a new significance. Each of the analyzed events has its own importance in the consciousness of the members of the two ethnic groups but the relation between the variables strictly evaluating the impact the event and the (declared) propensity to react to similar conflicts has been reduced.

Another explanation refers to the methodology, i.e. the efficiency of our scale to evaluate the propensity to react to similar conflicts. Such open questions, even if responded anonymously, may determine participants to avoid giving honest answers. Being citizens of ex-communist countries, the participants may still have an ambivalent attitude towards authority. Moreover, as a consequence of the terrorist attacks (e.g. 2001 USA, 2002 Russia, 2003 Spain) and under the information pressure of the mass-media, each individual may become aware of the fact that by declaring an 'extremist' attitude is both socially undesirable and potentially dangerous. As it was already mentioned, we consider that the question as well as the encoding system are quite simple but useful when trying to figure out some differences between people who have fewer chances to get involved in violent ethnic conflicts and those that have more chances to get involved in these kinds of conflicts.

A last explanation refers to the group of variables that can be linked to the inter-ethnic extremist attitudes or to the probability to react in an extremist way to conflict events in an interethnic context. It is possible that the interethnic variables we have taken into consideration are not the only ones that are in close relationship with the extremist

attitude. We have chosen these variables referring to the indirect extremist attitudes by analyzing the data related to the controversial social events. There are a lot of other variables that could be taken into consideration in such an analysis but we have tried to focus on those used in the flashbulb memories analyses as predictive variables of some stable and detailed memories.

Beyond the statistically significant differences between the people who declare to have rather '*active or extremist reactions*', in comparison to those that declare to have rather '*passive reactions*', the regressions equations we have obtained show two categories of variables considered by the predictors. The former are '*ethnic discrimination*' and '*ethnic attachment*', presented as predictors in the equations obtained in three of the ethnic groups (except for the ethnic Turks). Moreover, in the equation, we have obtained a sample that analyzed the controversial events in Romania (ethnic Romanians and ethnic Hungarians) the two variables obviously have a predictive value (constant = 1.8, $R^2 = .10$; Adjusted $R^2 = .10$).

The second set of variables, '*social sharing*' and '*sharing emotions*', are presented in the prediction equations obtained on batches formed from ethnic Bulgarians and ethnic Turks. In addition, on the sample that analyzed the controversial events in Bulgaria (ethnic Bulgarians and ethnic Turks), these variables are the only ones identified as predictors in a valid model of prediction (constant = 2.2, $R^2 = .08$; Adjusted $R^2 = .08$).

It is possible that these differences may be caused by the specific character of each event. The event in Romania was experienced as an unexpected violent episode, followed by tensions and echoes that decreased in time, while the one in Bulgaria was perceived as a

succession of events and political decisions, out of which some had been taken in during the communist period but lost part of their impact after the events in the year 1989.

For the first variables, the ones linked to the interethnic attitude, the relationship seems to be clear. Their attachment to their own ethnic group and the discriminatory attitude towards the other ethnic group is normal and is linked to a propensity to maintain these attitudes in conflict situations too. As for the second set of variables, the ones related to social sharing and sharing emotions, a possible explanation could be found in the context of the suggestion made by D. Paez, et al. (1997). According to them the rehearsing and arguing about a relevant and conflict-leaden event could provoke a polarization of social attitudes. If individuals share more about collective past events, then a polarization of attitudes will take place, because people can make the event fit more consistently into their social identity (D. Paez et al., 1997, p. 156).

One of the questions we have to answer, after carrying out this research, is if the second hypothesis stated above is valid. It seems to be confirmed by the data obtained in the case of the sample that has analyzed the Bulgarian controversial event but not by the data obtained regarding the Romanian controversial event. The second question refers to the explanatory power of the two sets of variables: the ones connected to sharing emotion/information in contrast to the ones connected to ethnocentric attitudes. We believe that an experimental design that could take into consideration the two sets of variables, referring to a common controversial event, could lead to relevant answers to these questions.

Finally we could consider that FB methodology is relevant to the study of non-FM public events. Because in previous studies this methodology was used especially to identify the existence of some flashbulb memories or to compare the flash memories to the non-flash ones, we have proven that this methodology can be used with satisfactory results in the analysis of the non-flash events (social events with great personal or social importance but not necessarily generating minute and stable memories).

If we consider this methodology relevant for social memory events and if we take in consideration the relation between the three sets of variables described above (the personal predisposition to react to a similar event, sharing emotion/information and interethnic attitudes) we have made a first step toward a new way of understanding the relations between social memory, social attitude and behavior in interethnic context.

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EVALUATION OF CONTROVERSIAL EVENTS IN A MULTI-ETHNIC CONTEXT

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EVALUATION OF CONTROVERSIAL EVENTS IN A MULTI-ETHNIC CONTEXT

TABLE 1. Sample Size, Percentage of Total Sample, Mean Age, Sex, Domicile and Studies by Ethnic Group Socio-demographic parameters of the sample

Participants (ethnic groups)	n		Age		Gender ²		Domicile ²		Studies ²		
	n	% of total sample ¹	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>male</i>	<i>female</i>	Rural	Urban	middle	secondary	academic
Hungarian	252	25,1	40,34	16,68	52,8	46,0	20,0	80,0	14,3	40,9	40,5
Romanian	251	25,0	37,55	15,25	51,4	46,2	21,2	70,8	7,2	58,6	33,1
Bulgarian	331	33,0	43,43	11,4	42,0	57,1	3,0	97,0	3,3	50,8	45,6
Turkish	169	16,8	41,21	13,27	43,8	46,7	20,7	76,3	14,2	37,3	47,9

Note. Percentages for Sex, Domicile and Studies do not always add up to 100 because of missing values.

¹N = 1003. ²Expressed as percentage of n.

EVALUATION OF CONTROVERSIAL EVENTS IN A MULTI-ETHNIC CONTEXT

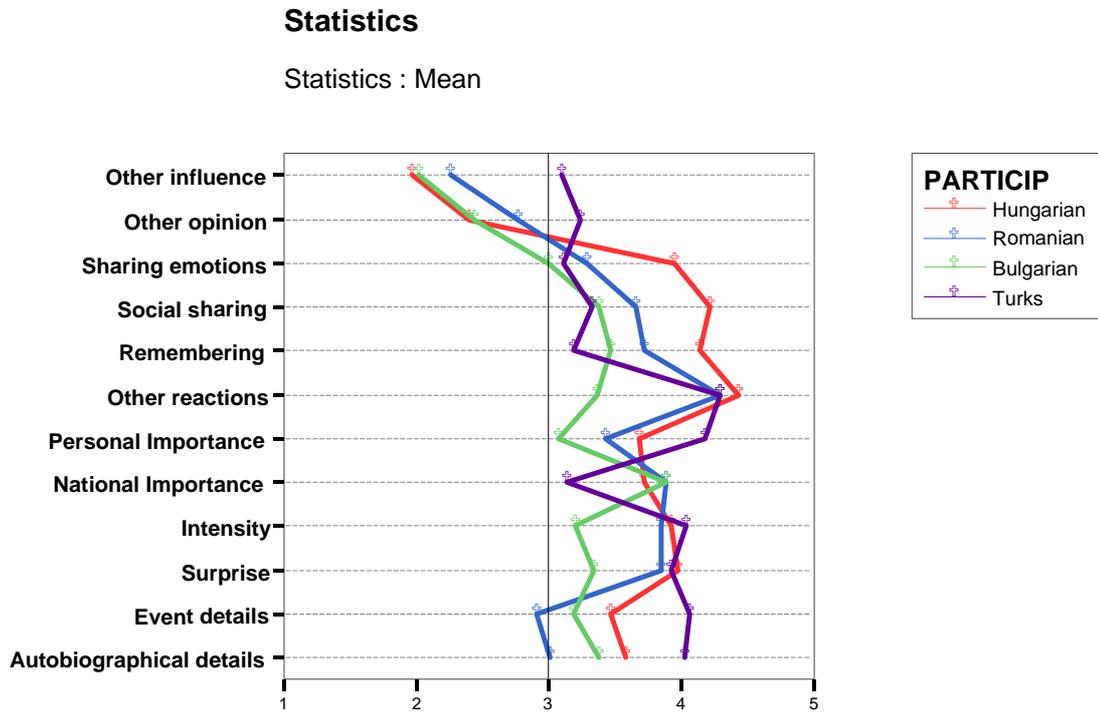


Figure 1. *Controversial event impact across the ethnic groups.*

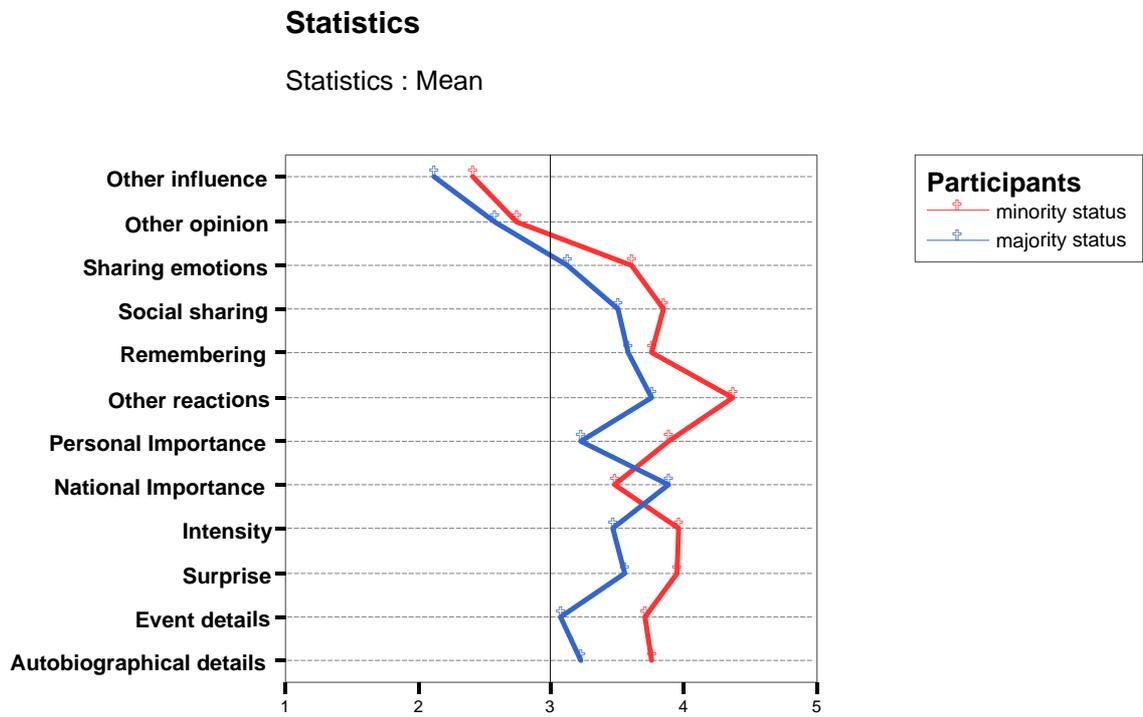


Figure 2. Controversial event impact - minority vs. Majority status.

Appendix /Endnote

ⁱ Surprise. The participants rated the extent to which they felt surprised when the event happened on a 7-point scale (from 1-*not at all* to 7-*very much*).

Intensity. The participants rated the intensity of their emotional reactions when they heard, the first time news about event. A 5-point scale was used (from 1-*not at all* to 5-*very much*).

Importance. Personal importance of the event as well as its importance for the country as a whole, were rated on 5-point scales (from 1-*not important at all* to 5-*very important*).

Other people's reactions. The intensity reactions of the other people during the event were rated on a 5-point scale (from 1-*not very strong* to 5-*very strong*).

Other people's opinion. The participants rated the extent to which the other people (relatives, friends, colleagues etc.) had a different opinion about the significance of the event or its consequences. A 5-point scale was used -from 1-*not at all* to 5 - *o a great extent*

Other people's influence. The participants rated the extent to which the other people (relatives, friends, colleagues etc.) tried to change /influence their opinion about the significance of the event or its consequences using a 5-point scale (from 1-*not at all* to 5 - *to a great extend*).

Social sharing. The participants rated the extent to which they discussed and shared information with the other people (relatives, friends, colleagues etc.) about the event. The item ranged from 1-*not at all* to 5-*to a great extent*).

Sharing emotions. The extent to which the participants shared their emotions with the other people /showed their feelings about the event was rated on a 5-point scale from 1- *not at all* to 5-*to a great extent*.

Remembering. The participants rated how often they had watched news and talk-shows about the event on a 5-point scale - from 1-*not at all* to 5-*very often*.

Autobiographical details. The extent to which the participants remember what they had been doing during those days was rated on a 5-point scale - from 1-*not at all* to 5-*a lot*).

Event details. Memory about the event and the extent reminding details about it was rated on a 5-point scale - from 1-*not at all* to 5-*a lot*.

As 'accuracy' variables the participants were asked for accurate information related to controversial event: *place, date, and day of the week*. The answers were encoded with '-1' for an incorrect answer, '0' for 'no answer or 'I don't know', '1' for a partly correct answer, and '2' for a correct answer. Similar measures are used by Conway, (1994, 1995) and Luminet et al. (2000, 2004).

ⁱⁱ For the 'animus' variable (personal predisposition to react to a similar event), the answers were encoded as follows:

- '*passive reactions*' - if they declare intention 'to do nothing' (1) or 'to complain by signing collective petitions' (2);
- *moderate reactions* - if they declare intention 'to participate in peaceful demonstrations' (3) or 'to convince or organize other people to protest' (4);
- '*active or extremist reactions*' - if they declare intention 'to participate in violent protest actions' (5) or 'to convince or organize people to participate in violent protest

actions' (6), as well as if they declare that they are ready 'to participate in fights (war) if an armed conflict is possible to burst out' or that they are ready (7) 'to fight by all means, including sabotages, actions against civilians or partisan fight' (8).