The Image of National Unity. Monuments of the Union in the Romanian Public Sphere*

Maria TĂTAR-DAN**

Introduction

The research project that the present paper is part of focuses on the cultural interactions between the Old Kingdom and the new provinces, seeking to highlight the process through which national identity was negotiated and consolidated during the interwar period. Through a comparative analysis of the new provinces, particularly Transylvania and Bessarabia, the project aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the nation-building process by identifying the factors that facilitated or hindered cultural integration. One key direction of this research focuses on national narratives, including myths, symbols, and rituals, as a central component of nation-building. Studies on the subject have overwhelmingly highlighted the importance of symbols and myths in shaping national identity[1]. The national narrative serves as the nation's backbone, bringing together its historical, cultural, and social elements in one cohesive story

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** Conferenţiar universitar, dr., Universitatea de Medicină, Farmacie, Ştiinţe şi Tehnologie „George Emil Palade" din Târgu Mureș

[1] Selectively: George L. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich*, New York, Howard Fertig, 1975; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, 1983; Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford, 1983; Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983; Anne-Marie Thiesse, *La Création des identités nationales. Europe, XVIIIe–XXe siècle, 1999;* Gopal Balakrishnan (editor), *Mapping the Nation*, London, New York, Verso, 1999 second edition.

that delineates its identity. Recognising this, the research focuses on the similarities and differences in the way aspects of the national narrative – including origin myths, national heroes, and key historical events – have been integrated into the cultures of Transylvania and Bessarabia and how the new provinces themselves have contributed to the construction of a common culture. Within this framework, the present paper focuses on public monuments and their role as instruments of cultural integration and national consolidation. The main research questions guiding this approach address the socio-political context of monument erection, their distribution across the newly unified country, the narratives they promote, the symbolic message they embody, and the image of the nation and national unity they convey.

Public Monuments in the Aftermath of the Great Union

The Acts of the Great Union generated undeniable enthusiasm among Romanians who had long lived under imperial rule and felt marginalised by other nationalities. Consequently, they embraced this new era with optimism, seeing their integration into a unified Romanian state as the fulfilment of their historical aspirations. The great significance of this event and the new political context called for public representation – a physical embodiment of national ideals and values. Thus, there was a widespread conviction that this historic transformation should be materialised in tangible and lasting forms, "worthy of the historical events that encapsulate the Great Union of 1918 and the accomplished ideas – unity, freedom, Latinity, etc."[2] The statue – "whether in marble or bronze, eternalising a representative personality or a great national act"[3] – was considered the most tangible and, at the same time, the noblest form of honouring the nation's history and heroes.

Monuments were seen as a powerful tool in "fixing" the past in the collective consciousness and defining the public space in accordance with the new realities. More than simple objects or mere artistic expressions, they embody the nation's struggles and triumphs, reinforcing awareness of its past while, at the same time, laying the foundation for its future:

> "A nation is stronger through its past, provided that this past remains part of the consciousness of the living. Monuments are the beacons that illuminate the Romanian consciousness."[4]

[2] Emil Grădinaru, *Monumente existente și propuneri pentru viitor*, in "Luceafărul", București, year I, no. 6, June 1935, p. 227.

[3] Diodor, *Inscripții*, in "Înfrățirea", Cluj-Napoca, year V, no. 1238, 29 November 1924, p. 1.

[4] *Monumentul Unirii la Arad*, in "Înfrățirea", Cluj-Napoca, year I, no. 134, January 1921, p. 2.

> "Statues, busts, and commemorative plaques represent tradition, history, and culture. They unite two eras and become intertwined with the evolution of a city, passed down from generation to generation as a sacred heritage."[5]
> "Monuments embody ideas in stone. They must serve as guiding beacons for future generations"[6].

In line with this perception of monuments as instruments for preserving and conveying national identity, memory, and gratitude to past generations, while also ensuring that future generations remain aware of their historical roots, two types of monuments were considered necessary: *monuments dedicated to great ancestors* meant to "pay tribute to the past and secure the future through a present that fulfils its national duty,"[7] and *monuments symbolizing the Union and political freedom*, which should serve as "a constant reminder of Romanian sovereignty and the duty of gratitude towards our ancestors."[8]

Thus, the beginning of the interwar period was marked by a deliberate effort to consolidate national identity not only in political and social terms but also on a symbolic level through public monuments. The press of the time frequently reported on proposals to build such monuments, illustrating the widespread enthusiasm for these symbols of the nation. Announcements of new monument projects, calls for public participation in fundraising efforts, and debates over the significance of historical figures or events reflect a deep engagement of the society in constructing its own historical narrative. These efforts can be grouped into several distinct monument categories, each serving a particular function in the broader project of expressing the nation's identity.

The first category consists of war memorials. Across Europe, such memorials served both as a reminder of the violence of war and as a means of glorifying those who had lost their lives. In Romania, numerous initiatives to build such monuments arose in all the regions of the newly united country. They came from local communities honouring their heroes, ethnic communities commemorating their fallen, but also professional groups paying tribute to their members who perished in the war. Examples include monuments dedicated to medical staff, doctors, teachers, railway workers, priests, administrative staff, civil servants, etc. Alongside the collective memorials, individual monuments were also proposed, honouring war heroes such as Ecaterina Teodoroiu, Second Lieutenant Obreja, Doctor Botescu, Soldier Stere, and others.

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[5] *Monumentul Unirii*, in "Gazeta Basarabiei", Chișinău, year III, no. 352, 17 January 1937, p. 1.
[6] *Datorii uitate*, in "Adevărul", București, year 47, no. 15194, 20 July 1933, p. 1.
[7] *Simbolul unității politice*, in „Patria", Cluj-Napoca, year II, no. 228, 26 October 1920, p. 1.
[8] *Liga Antirevizionistă ridică două monumente la Arad*, in "Universul", București, year 51, no. 341, 13 December 1934, p. 8.

However, the Romanian approach to war memorials diverged from the general trend prevailing in Europe, where the First World War profoundly fractured national traditions of memory and mourning. Over the long nineteenth century, European and colonial cities had been adorned with statuary proudly honouring military leaders who had led their forces to victory. However, the immensity of the loss of life in the Great War demanded a different register. The war memorials built across Europe and beyond after the 1914–18 war typically remembered the fallen soldiers of the community in a quiet and egalitarian fashion. While still placing them within a traditional idiom of heroism and sacrifice, these memorials functioned as places of shared mourning rather than national glory[9]. In early interwar Romanian society, war memorials that were being built were perceived as reflecting a contradictory approach to mourning, many arguing that these monuments were being designed in a way that diluted the act of grief, suppressing both the precise nature of the sacrifice and the funerary dimension. Rather than fostering sorrow, they were seen as promoting a more triumphant narrative, as if through them the survivors were seeking to exclude any sense of despair, even to the point of cultivating an "inverted compassion" and turning commemoration into a jubilant act, a phenomenon described as "*jălirea jubilindă*" (jubilant mourning).[10]

This tendency toward celebration – favouring triumph over mourning – can be understood in the context of Romania's trajectory during the war: reduced to the Moldavian region and forced to make peace, at the end of the war, it doubled its territory and population through the Great Union. However, this newly enlarged country needed to be legitimised. Sacrifices had to be acknowledged, but at the same time, the achievement of the unification took precedence, as its consolidation remained an ongoing challenge.

War memorials contributed to a uniformisation of the public space in Greater Romania, as such monuments were erected across all regions of the country, both old and new, urban and rural[11]. However, this was more a uniformisation through typology than form, as their concept varied. As both the state and the civil society took an interest in building such commemorative monuments and eternalising the sacrifices of the war that led to the Great Union, efforts

[9] Anna Maerker, Simon Sleight, Adam Sutcliffe, *History, Memory and Public Life. The Past in the Present,* Routledge, 2018, p. 18.

[10] *Monumentul Victoriei*, in "Viața Romînească", București, year 12, vol XLIV, Iași, Institutul de Arte Grafice și Editură Viața Românească, 1920, p. 44.

[11] For details on war memorials and commemorations in Romania see Maria Bucur, *Eroi și victime. România și memoria celor două războaie Mondiale,* Iași, Polirom, 2019.

were made to impose a model with a distinctly Romanian character – the *troiţa* (roadside crucifix), something that ultimately proved impossible to achieve.[12]

A second category consisted of statues, monuments, and commemorative plaques dedicated to cultural and intellectual figures. While there was a general trend for each area to honour its representatives, some figures crossed the regional borders and became part of a shared national culture. The first personalities embodied in this form in the new provinces were the King and the Queen, their association with the Union rendering their commemoration particularly important. Other figures followed, generally those with a direct or symbolic connection to the regions proposing the monuments. One of the earliest cultural figures to be celebrated across the country was the national poet Mihai Eminescu. In 1923, his statue was proposed in several towns from Transylvania and Banat, such as Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara, and Caransebeș, marking the semicentennial of the Academic Society "*România Jună*". Among the first intellectuals from the new provinces to cross the borders, there was Simion Bărnuţiu, a leading intellectual and participant in the 1848 events in Transylvania: his statue was proposed in Iași, where he spent his last years, teaching at the University. Similarly, Vasile Lucaciu "*leul din Șișești,*" a militant for the rights of the Romanian nation in Transylvania and a wartime refugee in Bucharest, was to be honoured with a statue in Bucharest in 1923.

The third category – which constitutes the subject of this paper – comprises monuments dedicated to the Great Union.

The Monument of the Union

As the one-year anniversary of the proclamation of the first act of the Union approached, the idea of erecting a grand monument dedicated to the unification of all Romanians under a single rule emerged to public attention. The monument was not just a tribute to past sacrifices; it carried a profound significance in terms of national consolidation and the legitimisation of Romanian rule.

> "The idea of building this monument is a collective one; it belongs to everyone – it belongs to all the Romanian people. It was born from the great Romanian spirit, which has brought our people together into a powerful nation."[13]

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[12] Valeria Soroștineanu, *Despre monumente și cultul eroilor,* in Corina Teodor, Giordano Altarozzim Maria Tătar-Dan, *Moștenirea lui Petru Maior. Abordări ale modernității în Europa Centrală și de Est,* Cluj-Napoca, Presa Universitară Clujeană, p. 171.

[13] Ioan Dăncilă, *Unde să se ridice „Monumentul Unirii"*, in "Alba Iulia", Alba Iulia, year II, no. 10, 26 February (11 March) 1919, pp. 1–3.

The monument was conceived as a visual embodiment of the Union, serving as a reminder for future generations of the efforts and sacrifices of those who made the Union possible, and at the same time, as a reminder that preserving these hard-obtained achievements required an everyday struggle and vigilance.[14]

> "This monument must be built to show our grandchildren and great-grandchildren the most meaningful event of our history, the fulfilment of the centuries-old dream of every Romanian. It is not just a desire, but the zenith of our hopes and aspirations."[15]

Although sentiments of revanchism could be justified, the Monument of the Union was not intended to convey such a message: "It should stand as a statement of the rightful consolidation of the historically predominant presence of the Romanian people."[16]

As the initial enthusiasm surrounding the Union began to fade and the challenges of the integration process emerged, a new dimension of the monument's purpose was added: its role in strengthening "spiritual unification." The visual image of the Romanian nation as a cohesive community that transcended regional loyalties became essential, not just a reflection of national pride but also as an instrument in shaping a shared identity. The monument of the Union was to be a symbol of collective belonging, intended to evoke a sense of common destiny and historical continuity. Paradoxically, however, the debate surrounding this great monument, intended to symbolise the unity of all Romanians, revealed regional particularities, each area claiming its territory as the most suitable location for its construction.[17]

> "This monument must be built in Transylvania, for Transylvania is the inestimable pearl, the cherished gem that the Motherland has always longed to hold. Transylvania remains the heart that has nourished every Romanian's longing to be united under a proud sceptre."[18]

Consequently, the idea of building a Union Monument began to take shape through several initiatives that emerged across the various regions of the newly enlarged country, reflecting a decentralised and organic process by which local communities sought to participate in this symbolic consolidation of national unity.

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[14] Valeria Soroştineanu, *op. cit.,* p. 172.
[15] Ioan Dăncilă, *op. cit.,* p. 2.
[16] *Monumentul Unirii la Arad*, in "Înfrăţirea", Cluj-Napoca, year 1, no. 134, January 1921, p. 2.
[17] Ioan Dăncilă, *op. cit.,* pp. 2–3.
[18] *Ibidem.*

First Initiatives

The first proposals, emerging in early 1919, came from Alba Iulia (Transylvania) and Chișinău (Bessarabia). In both cases, the initiative was led by local intellectuals who organised committees and launched fundraising campaigns through local public subscriptions that were soon expanded to a national scale.

The monument in Chișinău was envisioned by its initiators as "a symbol of patriotic devotion that will be regarded as a tribute to all those who fought for the national ideals and fulfilled the Union."[19] It was meant to act as a unifying force, consolidating the March 27, 1918 Act and sustaining the enthusiasm and hopes of the people of Bessarabia.[20] The proposed location for its placement was the centre of the town, on the pedestal of the statue of Alexander I. This statue, built in 1912 to commemorate the centennial of Bessarabia becoming part of the Russian Empire, bore the inscription "Grateful Bessarabia" (Blagodarnaia Basarabia).[21] As the inscription and the monument were considered an offence to the people of Bessarabia, there was a campaign for it to be taken down and replaced with the monument celebrating the liberation and the unification of Bessarabia with the Motherland.

The scale model contest was won by the sculptor Alexandru Plămădeală, who proposed a monument consisting of three parts: an equestrian statue of King Ferdinand portrayed in military uniform; two female figures symbolizing the union of Bessarabia with the Motherland; and two bas-reliefs on the sides of the pedestal depicting scenes from the 1918 National Council of Bessarabia – the voting of the Union and the voting of the agrarian reform. The central element of the ensemble was represented by the two female figures, with Romania personified by Queen Mary. The pedestal had the inscription "March 27, 1918," with Romania's coat of arms positioned above it. On the other side, there were two stone sculptures of a Romanian soldier (*dorobanț*) and a Bessarabian peasant breaking the chains of servitude. The monument's platform also included six columns bearing the coat of arms of Romania's historical provinces[22].

Despite widespread public enthusiasm and support from central authorities in Bucharest, the monument was never built. In 1937, another local committee, formed by veterans, proposed the commemoration of the Union through a statue of King Ferdinand I, the "Unifier of the Nation and the Country." This

[19] Elena Ploșniță, *Golgota monumentului unirii de la Chișinău,* in "Tyragetia", vol. XII [XXVII], no. 2, 2018, pp. 179–184.

[20] *Ibidem.*

[21] Romulus Cioflec, *Amintiri din anul Învierii,* in "Viața Romînească", București, year XII, no. 6, August 1920, p. 374.

[22] Elena Ploșniță, *op. cit.,* p. 180.

monument was unveiled on February 5th, 1939, but in 1940, when Bessarabia was ceded to the Soviet Union, it was relocated to Iași, where its traces were lost during the Second World War[23].

In Alba Iulia, the initiative of building a monument of the Union came from a group of teachers from the first Romanian high school, "Mihai Viteazul." The proposed monument aimed to depict the Union through key historical moments such as Mihai Viteazul's entering the town of Alba Iulia as ruler of Transylvania, the martyrdom of Horea and Crișan, and the Great National Assembly of December 1st 1918, which proclaimed the Union of Transylvania with Romania[24]. As the scale models presented at the first contest organised in 1922 and presided over by Prince Carol were not considered appropriate, a new contest was to be organised, the organising committee emphasising the fact that future design proposals should express the idea of voluntary union rather than liberation[25]. A notable proposal, popularised by the press of the time, the work of the sculptor Dumitru Măţăuanu in 1923, depicted the six Romanian provinces as feminine figures in traditional garments holding hands. In front of the pedestal, there was Romania's coat of arms, while on top stood a statue of King Ferdinand holding a mace[26]. However, as in Chișinău, although the fundraising efforts spread over the years failed, there was no other scale model contest, and the monument was never built[27].

These early initiatives were followed in the summer of 1919 by a proposal coming from the Romanian Academy to build a Union Monument in Bucharest by public subscription. There were no constraints on the artists; the only recommendation of the Academy was that the monument express the greatness of the Union, the idea of national continuity, and victory[28]. However, two years later, the Romanian Academy suggested that, given the monument's national significance, the state take upon itself the responsibility for its construction. At the same time, recognising the economic difficulties, the Academy decided to postpone the project for a time when the financial circumstances would be more appropriate. Instead, the Academy redirected fundraising toward the restorations of the Mircești houses and the erection of a monument in honour of the national poet Vasile Alecsandri[29].

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[23] Iulian Rusanovschi, *Monumentul Regelui Ferdinand I din Chișinău,* pp. 216–224, https://ibn.idsi.md/sites/default/files/imag_file/216–224_1.pdf

[24] "Unirea Poporului", Blaj, year XXIX, no.13, 24 April 1919, p. 5.

[25] *Ibidem.*

[26] "Adeverul", București, year XXXVI, no. 12089, July 1st, 1923, p. 6.

[27] "Biserica și școala", Arad, year XLVIII, no. 7, 11/24 January 1924, p. 8.

[28] *De la Academia Română,* in "Evenimentul", Iași, year XXVII, no. 122, 23 July 1923, p. 1.

[29] *Analele Academiei Române. Partea Administrativa și Desbaterile*, Seria II, Tomul XLI. 1920–1921, pp. 113–114.

By the end of 1919, three more initiatives for Union monuments emerged in Storojineț (Bucovina), Arad and Lugoj (Banat). The fundraising campaign initiated in Storojineț by General Mănescu, the county prefect[30], was redirected in 1922 for the union monument in Chișinău. Although in the following years the idea was revived, the monument in Storojineț was never built[31].

In Arad, the monument of the union was supposed to replace two prominent statues – the statue of Kossuth and the statue of the 13 Hungarian Martyrs, erected in the centre of the town by the former regime. Considered symbols of injustice and persecution, they were to be melted down and replaced with a statue of the Union and a statue of the Romanian national poet George Coșbuc[32]. Later on, the statue of George Coșbuc was replaced with one of Avram Iancu, the military leader of Romanians in 1848, who was considered to better express the historical justice of the Union[33]. Although the initiative of the Union Monument was launched by one of the great figures of 1918, Vasile Goldiș and gathered strong support from public opinion, the initial enthusiasm faded, as the funds collected were significantly reduced by the Law of Conversion. The idea was revived in 1932 by the cultural association "Astra" and then again in 1934 by the Antirevisionist League – an organisation opposing territorial revisionism. Placed under the coordination of Archbishop Andrei, General Petre Georgescu, the commander of the local military troupes, and the mayor, Al. Vlad, the Monument committee organised in the following years several fundraising campaigns, and even a scale model contest in 1939, hindered by the outbreak of the Second World War. Although the idea of the Union Monument remained present in the public discourse and was considered an unfulfilled duty of the town, the monument was never built[34].

In Lugoj, the initiative to build a Union monument was launched by the county prefect upon the Romanian army's arrival in the town. Local authorities supported the effort, organising a public subscription in 1920, but the project didn't advance further. However, in 1933, the idea was revived, and a

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[30] "Glasul Bucovinei", Cernăuți, year II, no. 271, 23 October 1919, p. 3.

[31] *Un monument al Unirii în Storojineț,* in "Glasul Bucovinei", Cernăuți, year VII, no. 1494, Cernăuți, 9 March 1924, p. 2.

[32] "Drapelul", Lugoj, year XIX, no. 107, 11 October 1919, p. 3.

[33] *Monumentul Unirii naționale,* in "Telegraful Român", Sibiu, year LXIX, no. 6, 19January/1 February 1921, p. 3.

[34] *Liga Antirevizionistă ridică două monumente la Arad,* in "Universul", București, year 51, no. 341, 13 December 1934, p. 8; "Aradul", Arad, year II, no. 34, 23 March 1932, p. 1; Al. Negură, *O nouă acțiune pentru ridicarea Monumentului Unirii, la Arad,* in "România", București, year II, no. 247, 7 February 1939, p. 9; Idem, no. 266, 16 February 1939, p. 9; "Curentul", București, year XI, no. 3649, 30 March 1938, p. 8.

monument of the Union was unveiled in Lugoj two years later. It featured on a granite pedestal a three-metre bronze soldier holding his weapon in an attack position, facing Budapest[35]. The front of the pedestal carried the symbol of Latinity – the she-wolf with Romulus and Remus. The right side displayed a plaque depicting the memorable scene of 1918 when "the powerful Romanian men in Alba Iulia handed King Ferdinand the act of the Union of Transylvania with the Motherland." On the left side, Queen Mary was portrayed with a Banat peasant family near a small wooden church[36], the inscription on the pedestal stating: "All in one country or all in one grave."[37]

Although neither of these proposals materialised in the first decade of the interwar period, they offer significant insights into the values and aspirations of the Romanian nation in the aftermath of the Great Union. The social backgrounds of their initiators – intellectuals, cultural elites, military figures, and local authorities – demonstrate a widespread public consensus regarding the symbolic necessity of marking this historic moment. The involvement of public authorities – local and central – illustrates the need to reinforce Romanian sovereignty, especially in the newly acquired territories where national minorities held stronger cultural and economic positions.

The way this foundational act of Greater Romania was symbolically conveyed through public monuments illustrates how the process of integration of provinces with distinct histories and identities was imagined and idealised. The Union was often symbolised through allegorical female figures in traditional garments and the figures of King Ferdinand, the "Unifier", and Queen Mary, the "Mother of the Nation", enforcing the imagery of a nurturing, protective motherland embracing her returning provinces. The use of allegorical female figures aligns with broader European trends in nationalist monument-building, but at the same time, it was adapted to Romania's historical context, reflecting the monument's integrative purpose, projecting an image of a cohesive national community that transcended provincial loyalties. The image of the historical provinces holding hands (as seen in the proposed Alba Iulia monument) visually expressed the idea of an organic, voluntary unification, countering narratives that framed the union as an annexation. The inclusion of soldiers and scenes of historical events further reinforced the narrative of sacrifice, continuity, and national legitimacy. By embedding national symbols and historical

[35] "Universul", București, year 52, no. 159, 12 June 1935, p. 3.

[36] *Desvelirea monumentului Unirii din Lugoj,* in "Dimineața", București, year 31, no. 10.207, 28 Mai 1935, p. 8.

[37] *Monumentul Unirii și al uitării,* in "Vestul", Timișoara, year I, no. 1395, 15 June 1935, p. 1; *Monumentul Unirei la Lugoj,* "Viitorul", București, year XXVII, no. 8214, 5 June 1935, p. 4.

narratives into the urban landscape, these monuments sought to reinforce the legitimacy of Greater Romania in the eyes of both its citizens and the international community. At the same time, the inclusion of historically relevant scenes specific to each province reflects the way in which these monuments function not only as vehicles of national ideology but also as mediums through which diverse communities negotiate their identities and roles within a broader political framework.

However, their failure to materialise during the early period of Greater Romania highlights the fragility of national narratives in the face of economic, political and regional complexities. Revived with impetus in the 1930s under the pressure of the rise of revanchist and revisionist regimes, most of them remained mere projects. The ones that were materialised diverged from the themes of the early interwar period, as the image of a nurturing motherland became more peripheral in representation. Central elements focused more on expressing strength, for example, the equestrian statue of King Ferdinand in Chișinău or the soldier in an attack position in Lugoj.

The Union Monuments of the First Interwar Decade

In the following years, several other initiatives were launched across the country: Cahul, Cetatea Albă (Bessarabia), Cernăuți (Bukovina), Sibiu, Orăștie (Transylvania), Timișoara, Caransebeș (Banat), Satu Mare (Partium), Iași, Brăila (Old Kingdom). Most of these proposals (7 out of 10) were initiated in the context of the tenth anniversary of the Great Union. However, despite the large number of initiatives that marked this decade, only three monuments were built: one in Cernăuți (Bucovina), one in Iași, and one in Brăila (Old Kingdom). Like the previous proposals, the monuments aimed to symbolically convey the unification of historical Romanian territories through public art that incorporated representations of the provinces as female figures, children, or other allegorical elements that reinforced the idea of a historical and natural identity with the Romanian state.

The proposal in Cernăuți initially took the form of a monument in honour of Grigore Ghica III, the Moldavian ruler (1764–1767 and 1774–1777), beheaded by the Ottomans for opposing the cession of Bukovina to the Habsburgs. However, the idea evolved into that of constructing a Union monument. Like the case of Chișinău, the new monument was intended to replace an older one, the so-called "monument of hypocrisy," erected by Austria in 1878, "in remembrance of the unification of Bukovina with Austria." The Austrian monument depicted Bukovina as a child joyfully running into the arms of Maria Theresa,

who was seated on a throne with Chancellor Kaunitz standing behind her. Bukovina was led by a woman holding a shield (representing Austria), followed by the nine muses, symbolising the so-called "voluntary unification."[38] The new Union monument, inaugurated in 1924, also illustrated Bukovina as a child, this time kneeling in front of a Romanian sentinel and kissing the national flag. At their feet lay an aurochs and a two-headed eagle, whilst the bas-reliefs portrayed significant scenes from Romanian history, such as the settling of Dragoș, the execution of Grigore Ghica III, and the heroic battles of Oituz and Mărășești. Behind the central scene, an aurochs was portrayed crushing the two-headed eagle, a clear symbolic statement[39]. The monument's construction was surrounded by controversies, with disputes arising over its emplacement, the fundraising process – local authorities being accused of forcing contributions – and even conflicts involving the sculptor and one of the architects. However, all the obstacles were overcome, and the monument was unveiled in 1924 in a grandiose celebration in the presence of King Ferdinand[40]. Over the years, it became an important landmark for public festivities.

Following the Soviet occupation of Bucovina, the monument was demolished. When the Romanian administration was restored in Cernăuţi in July 1941, a replica of the Union monument was erected on the same site in front of the City Hall. However, this second version was also destroyed after 1944 and has never been rebuilt. Today, only fragments of the original monument remain: the Moldavian aurochs crushing the Austrian eagle and two bas-reliefs preserved at the National Museum of History in Bucharest[41].

The second monument erected in the first interwar decade was the one in Iași, a donation of Princess Olga Sturdza, a preeminent figure of the time, well-known for her social and cultural activities. In 1921, she began working on a monument symbolising national unification, which depicted Old Romania embracing the newly united provinces[42]. In 1924, when the idea of a Union monument in Iași gained public attention, she donated the statue to the city, requesting that it be placed on Carol Street, in front of the commandment

[38] *Cu prilejul desvelirii monumentului Unirii,* in "Viitorul", București, year 18, no. 5010, 15 November 1924, p. 4.

[39] *Ibidem.*

[40] *Monumentul Unirii,* in "Opinia", Iași, year XIX, no. 4892, Iași, 22 September 1923, pp. 1–2; *Aniversarea Unirii. Desvelirea Monumentului Unirii,* in "Glasul Bucovinei", Cernăuţi, year VII, no. 1682, 5 November 1924, p. 2; *Monumentul Unirii la Cernăuţi,* in "Rampa", București, year VIII, no. 2254, 4 Mai 1925, p. 6.

[41] *Monumentul Unirii de la Cernăuţi,* https://www.dacoromania-alba.ro/nr40/unirea_cernauti.htm, accessed 20 May 2025.

[42] "Viitorul", București, year 13, no. 3933, 29 April 1921, p. 4.

building, where Queen Mary had resided during the Moldavian exile[43]. The monument's proposed location generated controversy, with some arguing that the Princess was enforcing her will on a whole city:

> "In the old capital of Moldova, a historic city, the cradle of Romanian ideology, with a population of 150.000, monuments cannot be imposed based solely on the taste and singular will of an individual, even if given as a donation."[44]

Despite some opposition, the municipality accepted her donation, and the monument was unveiled in 1927. It depicted a woman in military attire and wearing a war helmet – representing the Motherland – standing on a rock, symbolising the Carpathian Mountains. She embraced three female figures dressed in national garments, representing Bukovina, Bessarabia, and Transylvania, each illustrated as a woman peasant wearing a traditional national garment. A small child clung to the rock, symbolising the Romanians still outside the united country's borders[45]. Queen Marie personified Romania, while the figures of the provinces were inspired by girls from "Mihail Sturdza" School in Iași[46]. The monument "symbolising the victory and the love that has always kept alive the national consciousness" had several inscriptions. King Ferdinand's 1918 speech was engraved on the front of the pedestal:

> "I declare forever united in the Romanian Kingdom all the regions inhabited by Romanians, from the Tisa to the Dniester. Through struggles and sacrifices, God has granted us today the fulfilment of our most sacred aspirations. Let us consecrate the union of thoughts, the union of souls, and the union in fruitful labour, with the cry: Long live Greater Romania, strong and united! – Ferdinand I – December 5, 1918".

On the left side, an engraving featured the 1858 Moldavian Ad-hoc Assembly's proclamation of union, while on the right side, Olga Sturdza inscribed her dedication: "To the reunited Romanian nation and to Iași – the cradle of the unions – I dedicate this work of my heart and hands. Olga M. Sturdza – 1926"[47]. Although the monument was demolished by the communist regime in 1947, it was rebuilt in 1999, and it still stands today as a landmark of the

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[43] *Monumentul Marei Uniri,* in "Opinia", Iași, year XX, no. 5219, 24 October 1924, p. 2.

[44] *Monumentul Marei Uniri,* in "Opinia", Iași, year XX, no. 5226, 1 November 1924, p. 1.

[45] Dan, *Desvelirea monumentului Unirii de la Iași,* in "Dimineața", București, year XXIII, no. 5783, 31 May 1927, p. 8.

[46] *Monumentul Unirii din Iași,* http://monuments-remembrance.eu/ro/panstwa/rumunia–4/154-union-monument-in-iasi–2, accessed 28 May 2025.

[47] Dan, *op. cit.,* p. 8.

city, though in a different location (Piaţa Naţiunii, in front of the University of Medicine and Pharmacy).

The monument in Brăila was created by the sculptor Oscar Spaethe, known for his use of allegories. Erected in the Royal Square, it depicted Prince Charming defeating a dragon, representing foreign oppression. At the pedestal's base, Romania – personified as a woman – embraced her liberated sisters, the newly united provinces[48].

Proposed with great enthusiasm by representatives of the Romanian communities from both the new and old provinces of Romania, the monuments of the first decade of Great Romania tried to convey in the public space the national narrative dominated by the idea of a just return to the Motherland, emphasizing at the same time the Romanian continuity in this space and the historical ties that had maintained and nurtured the national ideal. These narratives encountered resistance from other ethnic communities, especially in the context where, in the new provinces, these proposals aimed to mark Romanian identity and sovereignty in the multicultural areas of cities, which had significant communities of other ethnicities that were culturally and economically better positioned. Proposed for erection on the sites of other statues or monuments symbolising the old regime, in which these minorities had been dominant, the union monuments generated resistance, sometimes even from local authorities still dominated by the new national minorities. This opposition added to other difficulties, particularly economic ones, contributing to the delay and, in most cases, the failure to build them. One example in this regard is the case of Sibiu, where the local administration, dominated by the Saxons, opposed both the idea of constructing the monument in the city's Great Square and its conceptual representation, instead advocating a representation of the union through the figure of King Ferdinand. Disagreements over the location and interference in the conceptual representation of the monument led to the rejection of the project by the Ministry of Culture, which considered the proposed location unsuitable for such a monument[49].

In addition to the monuments dedicated to the Great Union, in the first interwar decade, older initiatives to mark the previous stages of state building were revived. One example is the campaign initiated by the "Universul"

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[48] *Monumentul Unirei din Brăila,* in "Adeverul Literar și artistic", București, year V, no. 190, 27 July 1924, p. 7; Marian Gheorghe, *Statuile dispărute ale Brăilei,* https://obiectivbr.ro/content/statuile-dispărute-ale-brăilei, accesat 25 May 2025.

[49] *Un monument al Unirii la Sibiu*, in "Lupta", București, year VII, no. 2014, 7 August 1928, p. 3; P. Țincu, *Cum ar trebui să fie monumentul "Unirii" din Sibiu*, in "Tribuna", year I, no. 28, 23 September 1928, p. 2.

newspaper to bring into Romania a monument of the union of Walachia with Moldavia, commissioned before the war by a committee led by Tacke Ionescu, given to the Italian sculptor Raffaello Romanelli in Florence. The black granite monument depicted a Romanian peasant urging his oxen forward. On one side, two bronze relievos featured King Carol I and Queen Elisabeta, while on the other side, two women in national garments embraced each other[50]. Discovered by a "Universul" newspaper reporter in Romanelli's studio, the "forgotten" monument was paid for by the municipality of Galați and placed in a central square[51].

Less successful was the attempt to build a monument celebrating Dobrogea's reintegration into Romania. The monument was planned in the context of the semicentennial of 1878, which coincided with the tenth anniversary of the Great Union. It was supposed to replace another monument dedicated to this event, which had been built in 1898 on the Hora hillock in Tulcea but destroyed during the Bulgarian occupation in 1916. The monument depicted a brave Romanian soldier looking towards the mouth of the Danube, symbolising "the victory of the Romanian modern civilisation against the barbarity from the south."[52] The new monument was supposed to illustrate the province's "entire history, from the Greco-Roman era to its incorporation into Romania under the wise leadership of King Carol, featuring statues of key historical figures, especially Emperor Trajan and Prince Mircea, the great predecessors of King Carol I, the liberator."[53] Although the foundation stone was placed during the semicentennial celebrations, the project was never completed.

Proposed with great enthusiasm by representatives of the Romanian communities from both the new and old provinces of Romania, the monuments of the first decade of Great Romania tried to convey in the public space the national narrative dominated by the idea of a just return to the Motherland, emphasizing at the same time the Romanian continuity in this space and the historical ties that had maintained and nurtured the national ideal. These narratives encountered resistance from other ethnic communities, especially in the

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[50] C. Orășianu, *Un monument al Unirei Principatelor uitat în Italia,* in "Universul", București, year XLIV, no. 196, 26 August 1926, p. 1.

[51] "Universul", București, year XLIV, no. 237, 13 October 1926, p. 4.

[52] M.C. Sutzu, *Semicentenarul Dobrogei și monumental dela Adam-Clissi,* in "Universul", București, year XLIV, no. 239, 14 October 1928, p. 1; G. Millian, *În 17 ani,* in "Lupta", București, year XIV, no. 4054, 27 April 1935, p. 1; Ioana Marinache, *Pagini din odiseea înălțării monumentului independenței,* p. 35, available at:
https://tulcealibrary.ro/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/I.Marinache.pdf, accesat 30 May 2025.

[53] *Monumentul comemorativ al realipirei Dobrogei,* in "Cuvântul", București, year IV, no. 1135, 21 June 1928, p. 2.

context where, in the new provinces, these proposals aimed to mark Romanian identity and sovereignty in the multicultural areas of cities, which had significant communities of other ethnicities that were better placed culturally and economically. Proposed for erection on the sites of other statues or monuments symbolising the old regime, in which these minorities had been dominant, the union monuments generated resistance, sometimes even from local authorities still dominated by the new national minorities. This opposition added to other difficulties, particularly economic ones, contributing to the delay and, in most cases, the failure to build them. One example in this regard is the case of Sibiu, where the local administration, dominated by the Saxons, opposed both the idea of constructing the monument in the city's Great Square and its conceptual representation, instead preferring the representation of the union through the figure of King Ferdinand. Disagreements over the location and interference in the conceptual representation of the monument led to the rejection of the project by the Ministry of Culture, which considered the proposed location unsuitable for such a monument[54].

The Union Monuments in the 1930s

The political shifts of the 1930s, marked by the rise of nationalist regimes and the growth of revanchist and revisionist demands, generated new campaigns for establishing public monuments dedicated to the Union. The initiatives spread across the entire decade, intensifying in the later years of the interwar period. The initiators continued to come from local communities, including intellectuals, local politicians, and cultural associations, but also the newly established Antirevisionist League through its local subsidiaries. Launched with great enthusiasm, the monument proposals were welcomed and gathered public support. For example, the youth association of Gherla offered to contribute, even as labourers, in constructing the local monument dedicated to the Union[55]. All over the towns where these proposals emerged, concerts, theatre performances, and cultural events were organised, their profits being donated to the monuments-building funds. In some cases, the monument's construction was included in the urban planning projects, serving both the purpose of adorning the cities and as symbols of Romanian rule. At the same time, the 1930s witnessed a revival of previous initiatives, such as those of Sibiu, Arad,

[54] *Un monument al Unirii la Sibiu*, in "Lupta", București, year VII, no. 2014, 7 August 1928, p. 3; P. Țincu, *Cum ar trebui să fie monumentul "Unirii" din Sibiu*, in "Tribuna", year I, no. 28, 23 September 1928, p. 2.

[55] "Universul", București, year 52, no. 323, 23 November 1935, p. 12.

Timișoara, Lugoj, or Chișinău, which generated tremendous enthusiasm and optimism that they would finally be completed this time.

Despite these efforts, only two monuments were successfully erected during the second interwar decade: the one in Lugoj, previously mentioned, and another in Prundu Bârgăului. The latter, created in 1932 and inaugurated in 1933, was the product of the local school, the concept belonging to the director, Constantin Mihăilescu. It featured a massive oak *troița,* honouring the Bistrița garrison and dedicated to "Bistrița and to the glory of the nation."[56] Through a shift toward a more pronounced emphasis on strength, victory, and military power, the monuments of the second interwar decade reflect the change in the cultural and political landscape of the period. While these themes were also present in the proposals of the first interwar decade, they played a secondary role in the broader theme of unity and national unification.

Final remarks

The numerous initiatives to erect monuments dedicated to the Great Union reflect the deep desire to consolidate national unity and express the legitimacy of Greater Romania in the interwar period. These monuments were not merely commemorative projects but also powerful instruments of cultural integration, political affirmation, and historical memory. Despite the widespread enthusiasm and significant public support, most of these projects faced challenges that proved insurmountable. Even when public fundraising efforts were successful, other factors, such as economic crises or political factors, often led to their indefinite postponement or failure. Thus, although initiated with great eagerness in the general enthusiasm of the Great Union, the monuments dedicated to the foundational act of Greater Romania, in most cases, remained at the planning stage.

The repeated setbacks in constructing these monuments highlight the difficulty of sustaining national projects over time, especially in a newly unified and diverse country struggling with economic and social disparities. However, the persistence of these initiatives – even when they failed – demonstrates the enduring symbolic power of the Union in Romanian national consciousness. These monuments, whether realised or not, played a crucial role in shaping public discourse and reinforcing the idea of a cohesive national identity. Moreover, the projects that did materialise – such as those in Cernăuți, Iași,

[56] "Dimineața", București, year 2, no. 10.423, 1 January 1936, p. 12; "Dimineața", București, year 30, no. 9754, 21 February 1934, p. 12; "Universul", București, year 50, no. 181, 6 July 1933, p. 10.

Lugoj, or Brăila – illustrate how monuments functioned not only as markers of historical events but also as expressions of national ideals. Their iconography, often featuring allegorical figures of the provinces and representations of King Ferdinand and Queen Marie, sought to visually embody the idea of a united Romania, legitimising the historical and cultural bonds between the Old Kingdom and the newly integrated provinces.

Whether built or left unrealised, these monuments reveal the complexities of nation-building in Greater Romania. They highlight the tensions between local and national aspirations, historical memory and political reality. Above all, they serve as reminders of how deeply the Great Union remained embedded in the Romanian collective imagination, continuing to inspire debates, commemorations, and cultural projects long after the events of 1918.