

## 'Die Hard Level: Romanian' – Self-irony and Humour in English Language Memes about Romanians

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This article tackles the issue of Romanian national identity and stereotypes, drawing on the most recent research on digital forms of communication, more specifically, memes. The paper addresses the following research question: How do English-language memes about Romanians simultaneously reinforce and undermine national stereotypes through self-irony and visual humour? Post-communist Romanian national identity has been discussed in political and social arenas and academic circles for over 30 years (after the 1989 Revolution). Romanian national identity remains shaped by the legacy of its communist past while simultaneously embracing a European, Westernized orientation, whether examined in scholarly debates or within the context of establishing (new) roots in a democratic environment. This 'transitional' position may also be traced in the digital space. The present article focuses on analysing memes linked to stereotypes about Romanians to yield fresh interpretations of how self-irony and humour either strengthen or undermine perceptions of Romanian national identity and values. The discussion will tap into theories of memetic communication (see Kien 2019), visual rhetoric (see Foss 2005), and media rhetoric (see Mateus 2021). A noteworthy aspect of the analysis is the linguistic one, since all selected memes have been circulating with English texts, ensuring a broader audience and, hence, a better chance of going viral. To thoroughly conduct the analysis, this study will draw upon various theories surrounding the virality of digital multimodal texts and explore their profound implications in perpetuating stereotypes on a global scale.

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## Introduction

In the digital age, humour has become a powerful vehicle for the circulation of national identities, cultural anxieties, and shared narratives. Memes, the multimodal texts that thrive on rapid online dissemination, are at the heart of this phenomenon. The function of memes goes beyond entertainment, they visualise and reinterpret social perceptions, often through ironic distance and playful exaggeration. This article examines how English-language memes about Romanians function as cultural artefacts that simultaneously reinforce and undermine national stereotypes. At the intersection of humour, irony, and digital virality, these memes become a discursive site where Romanian identity is both constructed and contested.

The beginning of this article's title, 'Die Hard Level: Romanian', was inspired by a popular meme that features an ageing Romanian car, likely a Dacia from the communist era, bearing the sticker 'No airbags – we die like real men'.<sup>1</sup>

The humour in this example is constructed by juxtaposing a famous American movie title, *Die Hard*, where the hero always finds ways to survive, to the self-ironical stance of Romanians who are still driving very uncomfortable and dangerous vehicles (with no airbags). This is a very well-constructed meme, with enough information included so that anyone can understand its aims. Its humour stems from a profound cultural logic: a self-deprecating pride in resilience, a commentary on outdated infrastructure, and a gendered glorification of toughness that draws on local and global tropes. It encapsulates a rugged masculinity entwined with national identity, invoking fatalism as a coping strategy and cultural badge of honor. The hyperbolic tone parodies outdated technologies and infrastructural decay while framing endurance and fearlessness as iconic traits. Here, the vehicle is a literal remnant of communist-era production and a symbolic relic of a stoic national past. The meme functions as a site of dual effect, eliciting admiration for resilience and discomfort over the dangerous romanticisation of dysfunction. Its virality depends on this tension, carried by the universal humour of irony and the accessibility of English. Like many others analysed in the following pages, this meme exemplifies humour's performative capacity to articulate collective experience—in this particular case one shaped by Romania's complex post-communist legacy and its peripheral position within a Western-dominated digital discourse.

Since the fall of Ceaușescu's regime in 1989, Romanian national identity has undergone a prolonged and multifaceted transformation. While officially integrated into the European Union and rhetorically aligned with Western liberal values, Romania's

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<sup>1</sup> Die Hard Level: Romanian, online meme. Retrieved from <https://pt.memedroid.com/memes/detail/1404271>. Accessed September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2025.

cultural self-image remains suspended between inherited communist mentalities and aspirations toward modernity. This transitional position is frequently foregrounded in Romanian digital humour, where memes play a vital role in mediating local realities through globalised formats.

The meme corpus discussed in this paper was selected using the following criteria: (a) use of English-language captions for global accessibility, (b) thematic relevance to Romanian identity and stereotypes, (c) high circulation or engagement (virality) on mainstream meme platforms such as Reddit, Facebook, and meme aggregation sites, and (d) diversity in meme typology (e.g., pun-based, visual contrast, pop culture format). The corpus is only illustrative and aims to showcase dominant discursive patterns across formats and themes. The selected memes analysed in this paper construct stereotypes about Romanian nationhood by relying on a hybrid perspective: merging representations of modern European contemporary Romanian life with retrograde images inherited from a communist past. When these memes circulate in English, they transcend their national context and gain virality within transnational meme ecologies, thus amplifying both recognition and misrecognition of Romanian identity abroad.

The study is guided by the following central research question: How do English-language memes about Romanians simultaneously reinforce and undermine national stereotypes through self-irony and visual humour?

The goal of this study is threefold. First, it aims to analyse a series of widely circulated English-language memes about Romanians to identify the stereotypes they encode or subvert. Second, it explores how self-irony and humorous exaggeration serve as rhetorical strategies that facilitate the memes' viral potential. Finally, it reflects on the cultural consequences of consuming such memes, how they shape both internal and external considerations of 'Romanianness', often oscillating between affectionate ridicule and reductionist essentialism. This approach is in line with memes fulfilling '*social functions* in their online circulation' (Ntouvlis and Geenen, 2023. Emphasis my own).

The present study integrates three methodological pillars: (1) visual rhetorical analysis (Foss 2005) used to interpret the persuasive or iconic value of image-text compositions; (2) memetic communication theory (Kien 2019; Ntouvlis & Geenen 2023) applied to understand memes' networked cultural function and virality (Arjona-Martín et al. 2020; Alhabash and McAlister 2015); and (3) stereotype theory and digital discourse analysis, focusing on how identity markers are semiotically encoded and circulated.

This article adopts an interdisciplinary approach that situates memes as semiotic vessels of identity negotiation. In doing so, it also engages with a broader interest in how humorous visual media contribute to forming and disseminating stereotypes, especially in post-authoritarian or transitional societies.

The following sections first establish the theoretical and methodological framework of this inquiry before offering a close reading of selected memes. Each example is analysed not only for its rhetorical construction but also for its cultural work, what it says, shows, or silences about Romania in the eyes of both insiders and outsiders. Ultimately, this article argues that these memes are not trivial jokes, but significant indicators of how Romanian identity is continually performed and contested in the digital public sphere.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

The present article is situated at the intersection of digital communication, visual rhetoric, semiotics, and humour studies. In this study, memes are not treated as ephemeral pieces of internet humour. Instead, they are viewed as culturally loaded texts. Their structure, language, and visual form contribute to constructing and disseminating Romanian national identity.

To examine the dynamics of meme creation and reception, this section will first define the key concepts and then explore their relevance in relation to stereotyping, virality, visual humour, and language use.

### ***Defining memes in digital culture***

Richard Dawkins originally coined the term meme in *The Selfish Gene* (1976), where it denoted a unit of cultural transmission or imitation. Dawkins envisioned memes as self-replicating cultural elements, analogous to genes, evolving through variation and selection. In contemporary digital culture, however, the concept has expanded significantly.

In 2014, Shifman defined internet memes as '(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users' (Shifman, 2014: 41). This definition highlights the memetic structure and the dialogic and networked nature of meme communication.

Another definition of memes is offered concisely by Kara Rogers in the most recent issue of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. She clarifies that Internet memes are spread by email, social media or different kinds of websites and they 'often take the form of pictures,

videos, or other media containing cultural information that, rather than mutating randomly, have been deliberately altered by individuals' (Rogers, 2024). Rogers's explanation includes two important features: the mention of 'cultural information' and people's intentionality embedded in meme creation. As this special issue focuses on visual representations of stereotypes, the present study will engage with the notion of intentionality. The second part of the paper will discuss selected memes linked to stereotypes about Romanian identity from this particular point of view.

The multimodal nature of memes, their combination of image, text, and often embedded cultural references demands a semiotic approach. Kien (2019) and Eppink (2014) explore how memes and formats like GIFs and emojis have become central to meaning-making in digitally overloaded societies. These elements function as shorthand for emotion or commentary and as tools for rhetorical framing or parody. As Danesi (2017) and Giannoulis and Wilde (2021) observe, emojis and visual tokens have fundamentally transformed the digital lexicon, merging affective cues with semiotic codes in a globalised visual language.

In this light, memes should be seen as 'digital multimodal texts that fulfil social functions in their online circulation' (Ntouvlis and Geenen, 2023), often through humorous exaggeration, irony, or parody. Their visual and textual layers construct meaning through what Foss (2005) calls visual rhetoric, the use of images to persuade, critique, or produce cultural identification. When memes deal with national identity or ethnicity, they often serve as micro-narratives that condense shared knowledge, stereotypical frames, or contestations of those frames. In this context, this article suggests that the Romanian memes selected for this study function as more than amusement by activating networks of symbolic associations, often mediated through English as a global lingua franca.

### ***Stereotypes and visual iconology***

According to James Neuliep, our brains process information efficiently by constructing categories, socially constructed templates that associate certain traits with membership in different social groups:

Once created, categories are the basis of prejudgment, such as stereotyping. Considered a subset of categorization, stereotyping involves members of one group attributing characteristics to members of another group. These attributions typically carry a positive or negative evaluation. In this sense stereotypes are categories with an attitude. Stereotypes typically refer to membership in social categories, such as sex, race, age, or profession, that are believed to be associated with certain traits and behaviours (Neuliep, 2006: 188–189).

Silverman (2012) expands on this by describing stereotypes as overly simplified and often pejorative representations that are mistaken for truth. Visual memes, particularly those involving national or ethnic identity, tend to rely heavily on these templates, frequently invoking recognizable imagery such as rural settings, historical leaders, traditional clothing, or infrastructural decay. The approach taken here follows Erwin Panofsky's iconological methodology, which proposes that images must be interpreted within their broader cultural and historical frameworks (Panofsky, 1939). Humorous memes are especially effective in this regard, since they can engage with audiences while simultaneously critiquing or reinforcing ideological stances. This is particularly relevant in post-communist Romania, where humour often becomes a means of reprocessing trauma, expressing disenchantment, or articulating national pride through irony.

In his study on Balkan memes published in 2023, Zoltán Veczán warns that 'stereotypes and oppressive practices are still widespread in discourses on online platforms in many online genres, including Internet memes or meme-aggregating platforms' (61). When it comes to stereotypes embedded in memes, important components are irony (and self-irony) along with humour, which become critical to ensure their virality. As the subsequent analysis will point out, both negative and positive stereotypes of Romanian nationhood are displayed in the selected memes. However, it is not within the scope of this study to analyse which of them have been more viral and widespread. This latter topic could be approached in a future study.

### ***Memetic communication, virality, and language use***

Memes are not static images but dynamic communicative acts. Their power lies in their ability to spread, adapt, and generate dialogue. According to Grant Kein (2019), 'memetic communication' refers to the global, viral spread of memes under the right conditions. He describes this phenomenon as 'a conspiracy of several technical advances, socio-cultural activities, and theoretical/philosophical assertions in our everyday lives' (2). In his view, if a meme is shared at the right moment (in socio-political-mediatic terms) it will become viral, thus disseminating in the network across all borders. When considering memetic communication, there are two directions of interest in research, namely memes' 'material composition (how memes are made) and their social function (what memes do)' (Ntouvlis and Geenen, 2023: 2). Hence, memetic communication, as conceptualized by Kien (2019) and Ntouvlis and Geenen (2023), comprises two core functions: the material composition of memes (text, image, caption, symbol) and their social function (identity construction, critique, community formation).

Virality is central to meme culture. Berger and Milkman (2012) identify six key drivers of viral content: social currency, triggers, emotion, public visibility, practical value, and storytelling. Similarly, Alhabash and McAlister (2015) discuss three dimensions of virality in social media: 'reach (viral reach), which refers to the actions of the users to share and disseminate a message; the affective/ emotional evaluation of the contents, that is, the emotional or rational expression (of judgment) on the part of the users; and the public opinion that netizens [(i.e. citizens of the internet)] create on the messages through comments.' (Alhabash and McAlister 2015 qtd. in Arjona-Martín, Méndiz-Noguero and Victoria-Mas 2020: 4). To these drivers of virality, Phelps et al. (2004) add that user motivation plays a role in meme propagation, often tied to the emotional valence or novelty of the content.

However, language is a key dimension frequently overlooked in virality studies. The memes analysed in this article are about Romanian people, places, and cultural tropes, but they are all written in English. This choice cannot be incidental since English is the dominant language of global meme culture, granting memes broader visibility and viral potential. Using English allows for these representations of Romanian identity to circulate beyond national boundaries, entering global arenas of digital discourse. This circulation, however, is not neutral: it often strips context, simplifies nuance and reinforces externally recognisable stereotypes for broader consumption.

Moreover, the use of English reflects a double-coded cultural address. On the one hand, these memes are often created by Romanians for international audiences. They adopt a self-ironic stance that resonates with diasporic and post-communist humour. On the other hand, English invites appropriation by non-Romanian audiences who may interpret the memes without understanding their historical or cultural subtext. Ntouvlis and Geenen (2023) describe this as a memetic tension between 'how memes are made' and 'what memes do' (2). This tension becomes especially visible in the complex interplay of humour, identity, and global visibility.

In this way, language choice in memes becomes a rhetorical act. It facilitates virality and shapes the meme's interpretive frame by turning a national in-joke into a global punchline. As such, English-language memes about Romanians reveal what is being said and to whom, how, and with what cultural consequences.

### ***Emojis, GIFs, and the visual turn***

Although this study does not focus directly on emojis or GIFs, their role in shaping the broader visual grammar of Internet communication is worth noting. The widespread use of emojis, now tracked and ranked by platforms such as Unicode (Daniel 2022), reflects



an increasing reliance on visual shorthand in digital discourse. Emojis, GIFs, and memes form an interconnected visual lexicon that users manipulate to communicate tone, stance, and affect. As such, memes about Romania whether satirising traditionalism, mocking post-communist inefficiencies, or celebrating culinary pride, participate in this more extensive system of visual semiotics.

The shift from verbal to visual communication has prompted scholars like Mitchell (2017) and Snyder (2014) to call for new frameworks of image testimony. Visual media do not merely illustrate; they testify, archive, and narrate cultural truths and anxieties.

Thus, the memes examined in this study act as informal archives of national (self-) perception, revealing the tensions, contradictions, and comic relief embedded in Romania's ongoing negotiation of its European identity.

### **Memes Analysis**

Memes function as condensed cultural commentaries, translating complex socio-political realities into visual and textual humour. In the case of memes about Romanians circulating in English, this humour often relies on irony, self-deprecation, and the strategic deployment of stereotype, sometimes reinforcing, other times subverting conventional representations.

Each meme analysis in the following sections relies on the theoretical framework outlined in the previous section. Foss's theory on visual rhetoric (2005) provides the perspective to decode the image-text relationship. Additionally, specific visual formats and cultural references are discussed via theories of digital virality (Berger and Milkman, 2012; Alhabash and McAlister, 2015) to assess how they might influence meme circulation. These frameworks allow for a typological understanding of how Romanian identity is constructed and contested in English-language memes.

The following analysis is grouped into three thematic categories to better illustrate the discursive patterns: (1) historical and political memory; (2) urban and infrastructural representations; and (3) linguistic and folkloric identity cues. These analyses show how memes mediate between shared history, digital culture, and evolving conceptions of Romanianness.

#### ***Historical and political memory***

The memes in this category focus on Romania's communist past and its residual influence on national consciousness. These visual texts activate a shared historical memory by referencing iconic figures (such as Nicolae Ceaușescu) and invoking collective experiences of authoritarianism and ideological disillusionment. Using tools



of visual rhetoric (such as facial expression, symbolic juxtaposition, and genre parody), these memes articulate a uniquely Eastern European form of testimonial humour.

From a memetic perspective, they draw on globally familiar formats (social media grids, pop culture characters) to translate culturally specific trauma into shareable content. In doing so, they reflect or reinforce stereotypical narratives about Romanian resilience, post-communist cynicism, and emotional toughness. The visual economy of these memes allows them to function as compressed ideological statements, where complex histories are rendered legible through typological structure and intertextual cues.

As well as the meme discussed at the start of this paper which is illustrative for this thematic category, I will provide two other examples.

The first meme<sup>2</sup> analysed reimagines Nicolae Ceaușescu through the self-presentation tropes of LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, and Tinder, applying genre parody to recast authoritarian imagery into a template of social media branding. In the LinkedIn presentation, Ceaușescu is dressed in a formal light-grey suit, standing confidently outdoors, suggesting professionalism and respectability, aligning with the career-focused image. For the Facebook persona, the dictator and his wife pose closely together for a formal portrait, smiling slightly, evoking a sense of family or personal life sharing. Next, Ceaușescu is wearing dark sunglasses, a hat, and a scarf, looking stylish and mysterious, suggesting a carefully curated, trend-conscious appearance often associated with Instagram aesthetics. In the last image, the dictator is standing in a swimsuit on a sunny day, looking relaxed and confident, portraying a more revealing, personal, and flirtatious side, which connects to Tinder's dating-oriented image.

The juxtaposition subverts political memory through the ironic lens of digital performance, turning historical trauma into consumable humour.

Its visual rhetoric relies on genre parody and persona construction. Each frame reimagines Ceaușescu through the self-presentation logic of social platforms, rendering a dictator not through ideology or violence, but through humorous branding tropes. The meme invites visual decoding through ironic proximity, contrasting authoritarian gravitas with the banality of social media culture.

Importantly, the meme mobilizes stereotypes of Romanian political identity rooted in a post-communist legacy. Ceaușescu's enduring visual presence 36 years after his death taps into a cultural shorthand for autocracy and the grotesque absurdities of the late socialist regime. The humour emerges not just from the meme format, but from a

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<sup>2</sup> Ceaușescu online profiles, online meme. Retrieved from <https://www.threads.com/@antimanele104/post/C9mgYINo-HqF/media>. Accessed September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2025.

tension between historical trauma and contemporary irreverence. This digital literacy act relies on familiarity with both Ceaușescu's legacy and the visual conventions specific to online platforms.

Memetically, the meme benefits from the recognisability of its grid format and the contrast between historical content and modern digital performance. While its virality may be constrained by cultural specificity, the meme still conveys a globalisable irony. The absurdity of portraying authoritarianism through Tinder aesthetics invites broader reflection on the mediatisation of power. Thus, the meme participates in a typology of nationalist self-irony, where trauma is domesticated through humour, and collective memory is processed via satirical aestheticisation.

Notably, the meme also reflects generational shifts in processing history, transforming a once-untouchable figure of authoritarianism into material for viral comedy. The humour here disarms trauma, rendering it consumable and relatable to younger audiences.

Another example is the meme displaying 'Western teenagers praising communism vs. Eastern Europeans'.<sup>3</sup>

This meme stages ideological contrast through a familiar diptych format, leveraging characters from *Game of Thrones*: Daenerys (Western gaze) and Arya (Eastern lived reality). The purpose is to encode divergent cultural memories of communism. Its visual rhetoric functions through facial expression typology. Thus, Daenerys appears serene, almost romanticised, while Arya looks grim and psychologically burdened. The meme's rhetorical power lies in this contrast, which requires no explicit text beyond the labels to convey an entire historical worldview. According to Foss (2005) drawing on Chryslée, Foss and Ranney (1996), such visual economy, where images alone construct argument, typifies potent visual rhetoric.

This meme primarily highlights the tension between Western and Eastern European perceptions of communism. While Westerners often view it as an ideal or utopian system, Easterners are still processing the realities of their lived, often harsh, historical experiences. This opposition introduces a stereotypical split. Consequently, the meme reinforces a stereotype of Eastern Europeans, Romanians included, as cynical and shaped by suffering. Arya's hardened face becomes symbolic of national identity forged through hardship, aligning with narratives of Romanian persistence in the face of history.

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<sup>3</sup> Communism: Western vs. Eastern European views online meme. Retrieved from [https://www.reddit.com/r/CommunismMemes/comments/1aqsni4/more\\_like\\_eastern\\_european\\_teenagers\\_praising/#lightbox](https://www.reddit.com/r/CommunismMemes/comments/1aqsni4/more_like_eastern_european_teenagers_praising/#lightbox). Accessed September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2025.

From a structural perspective, the meme uses intertextual familiarity with a pop-culture series (*Game of Thrones*) to encode local trauma in a format accessible to international audiences. Nevertheless, its virality depends on the viewer's ability to recognise both the *Game of Thrones* reference and the political commentary. The meme invites empathy without explanation, positioning Eastern European users, including Romanians, as visually asserting their historical narrative in a media space often dominated by Western assumptions.

### ***Urban and infrastructural identity***

The memes in this section explore how urban landscapes and infrastructural markers become shorthand for national identity in digital visual culture. Romanian cities, particularly the capital Bucharest, are depicted through decaying buildings, chaotic traffic, or ironic juxtapositions of modernity and dysfunction. These memes employ visual rhetoric techniques such as symbolic compression, spatial contrast, and compositional exaggeration to frame infrastructure not merely as physical space, but as cultural commentary.

Drawing from memetic typologies like the 'starter pack', side-by-side comparisons, and template formats, they evoke everyday frustrations and lived absurdities. In doing so, the memes tap into and perpetuate stereotypes of inefficiency, post-communist stagnation, and Balkan disorder. At the same time, they often reclaim these tropes through self-directed humour. Amusement derives from paradox and irony, making these memes effective vehicles for both critique and identification. Their viral potential lies in the relatability of urban experience. Due to their digital literacy, users can decode, and remix visual cues tied to local infrastructure.

The first example is a meme<sup>4</sup> that can be labelled as '*Japan vs. Romania*'–(non-) *progress as identity*.

This meme stages a visual comparison between Japan's infrastructural resilience and Romania's perceived inefficiency. Using a diptych structure, which is standard in contrast memes, it compares two temporally labelled photographs. One shows a repaired Japanese road seven days after what looks like an earthquake, the other depicts a Romanian road with a pothole still not fixed after 25 years. Visually, the diptych functions as a metaphor, with the state of a road representing the developmental capacity of an entire nation. The meme compresses cultural critique into a symbolic and emotional contrast in order to impress visually.

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<sup>4</sup> Japan vs. Romania online meme. Retrieved from [https://www.reddit.com/r/funny/comments/c7tgui/things\\_dont\\_change\\_that\\_fast\\_in\\_romania/#lightbox](https://www.reddit.com/r/funny/comments/c7tgui/things_dont_change_that_fast_in_romania/#lightbox). Accessed September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2025.

The emotional charge, primarily frustration and irony, aligns with Berger and Milkman's (2012) virality drivers, especially those of high-arousal negative emotion and social currency. Romanian viewers are expected to recognise and resonate with the infrastructural stagnation depicted, transforming shared disillusionment into a culturally specific in-joke. This self-awareness boosts the meme's shareability by positioning it as a form of digital self-irony, a mode of humour often used by communities grappling with internalised critique.

The meme activates and reinforces several national stereotypes. The meme portrays Romania as bureaucratically inert, technologically lagging, and unable to fulfil basic promises of modernisation. This image is deeply rooted in post-communist narratives and broader European discourses of East-West asymmetry. Japan, in contrast, is stereotyped as the hypermodern Other: disciplined and technologically advanced. These stereotypes are neither questioned nor nuanced; instead, they are visually supported through spatial metaphor and temporal exaggeration.

However, the meme does more than reproduce stereotypes. It allows Romanian users to confront them in an ironic and reflexive manner. By appropriating this format, Romanians may be enacting a kind of digital self-branding, where cultural inferiority becomes a humorous identity marker. Thus, the meme can be interpreted as a rhetorical performance of national self-awareness, grounded in stereotype but tempered by humour and affective solidarity.

Finally, the meme might also offer a subtle critique of the illusion of European standardisation, suggesting that Romania's infrastructural realities remain disconnected from broader EU development ideals. While the meme might reinforce the image of a 'backward' state, it simultaneously expresses the citizens' frustration when dealing with the gaps between national belonging and material reality in post-accession Romania.

The next meme is entitled 'Bucharest starter pack'<sup>5</sup> and is representative for architectural and urban identity.

This meme uses the 'starter pack' format, a common memetic typology that assembles stereotypical visual cues to sketch an archetype, in this case, the Romanian capital, Bucharest. The format relies on visual metonymy: a small cluster of symbolic images stands in for a broader cultural or geographic identity. Each element, from communist-era buildings and chaotic traffic, to decaying infrastructure and impressive bookstores and architecture, acts as a visually encoded stereotype contributing to a satirical composite of the city.

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<sup>5</sup> Bucharest starter pack online meme. Retrieved from <https://ifunny.co>. Accessed May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2025.

The visual layout of the meme becomes an iconic symbol, fusing divergent fragments into a compressed narrative about urban life. These images evoke affective responses such as frustration, irony, or nostalgic resignation. The meme portrays Bucharest as chaotic, historically burdened, and suspended between modernity and dysfunction.

Although the meme is city-specific, its resonance extends to broader national stereotypes. The images reproduce persistent descriptions of Romania as a hybrid of modern and post-communist symbolism. The meme functions as an act of reflexive stereotype performance, enabling Romanians to engage in ironic self-portrayal that both critiques and reclaims negative visual symbolism.

The meme is effective because it relies on cultural clarity. For local audiences, it activates shared visual literacy and lived experience. For outsiders, the 'starter pack' template enhances its recognisability. It can be interpreted as both cultural critique and an indicator of (ironic) belonging, illustrating a voice that is simultaneously self-deprecating and assertive.

As previously mentioned, this meme reflects hybrid positionality. On the one hand, it includes positive examples such as inviting bookstores and aesthetic architecture. On the other hand, the meme comprises unattractive references such as communist-era buildings and unruly drivers. These construct the image of Bucharest as a city of contradictions. The subject position of the meme's creator could be that of a self-ironic Romanian or a foreign observer mimicking local discourse. Either way, the meme functions as a cultural warning or orientation guide, playfully instructing viewers on what to expect in Romania's capital.

### ***Language, food, and folklore stereotypes***

The memes in this section address recurring cultural stereotypes tied to language peculiarities, culinary identity, and folkloric imagery, all of which serve as accessible markers of national identity. These memes engage with visual and verbal tools, using irony, pun-based humour, and cultural exaggeration to express and reinforce simplified representations of Romanian identity. From a visual rhetorical standpoint, they rely on iconography, juxtaposition, and affective appeal to project national difference in both critical and humorous terms.

The first meme in this category<sup>6</sup> could be labelled as '*U.S.A. vs. Romania*'—*strength and gender stereotypes*.

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<sup>6</sup> U.S.A. vs. Romania, online meme. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/romanianlolmemes/>. Accessed May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2025.

This meme contrasts global military might with folkloric resilience: a Romanian woman in traditional dress is depicted as outperforming U.S. soldiers. She is casually carrying a large, heavy log on her shoulder, appearing relaxed and unbothered while American soldiers are struggling and grimacing while carrying a single log, implying effort and hardship. Through visual comparison and nonsensical exaggeration, it reorders geopolitical hierarchies. Irony is used to suggest that cultural rootedness and mythical strength surpass advanced weaponry. Visually, it employs incongruity and symbolic reversal to subvert expectations of Western superiority while provoking both national pride and humour.

The meme deploys multiple national and gendered stereotypes. The strong Romanian peasant woman embodies national endurance. In contrast, the image of U.S. soldiers evokes brute force and technological might, coded as masculine and disciplined. The visual contrast supports a narrative of spiritual and physical superiority on Romania's part, couched in rustic authenticity, while implicitly critiquing perceived Western superficiality.

Notably, the meme enacts a form of ironic national self-assertion. It exaggerates the comparison to a humorous extreme, converting feelings of marginality into symbolic strength. Rather than denying global asymmetry, the meme engages with it reflexively, transforming inferiority into a point of pride. This dynamic aligns with a postmodern, digitally fluent patriotism that navigates stereotype and identity through humour.

At the same time, the meme rewrites older tropes. By anchoring Romanian identity in folkloric imagery and physical labor, it freezes the national character in a timeless, rural past. The female figure becomes not just a symbol of resilience but also a carrier of collective suffering. This also reinforces a visual stereotype of Eastern Europe as rugged, anachronistic, and feminised. The humour thus affirms cultural pride, but at the cost of nuanced representation.

This example thrives on shock value and subversive contrast, making it a highly shareable meme within spaces where ironic nationalism circulates. It belongs to a broader category of digital content in which peripheral nations reclaim agency through strategic self-parody, turning stereotypes into performative tools of resistance and identity assertion.

Another example in this thematic category is the meme 'Meanwhile in Romania'<sup>7</sup> where the humour rests on the display of traditionalist practice in a globalized world.

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<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile in Romania online meme. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/romanianlolmemes/>. Accessed May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2025.

This meme leverages visual contradiction: a horse-drawn cart at a McDonald's drive-thru. The purpose is to dramatise socio-economic strangeness and temporal dissonance. From a visually rhetorical standpoint, the juxtaposition of pre-industrial transport and global consumer capitalism serves as a symbol of Romania's uneven modernisation. The image simultaneously evokes laughter and critique by placing two realities side by side: rural tradition and westernised fast-food modernity. The dichotomy operates through visual paradox, a common trope in digital humour, and creates emotion, a key driver of virality according to Berger and Milkman (2012).

The meme type is known as 'Meanwhile in...', which often highlights national (or regional) oddities in exaggerated terms. In this context, 'Meanwhile in Romania' not only locates the image geographically but also functions as a way to highlight perceived deviation from global norms. The meme activates and circulates familiar stereotypes of Romania as outdated, rustic, and lagging behind modernity, reinforcing an essentialist East/West binary in which Western development is the implicit standard.

Nevertheless, the meme can also have a secondary function, namely, self-ironic pride. For Romanian viewers, this meme could also be illustrative of a recognition of cultural persistence despite modernisation. The horse-drawn cart, while comically misplaced, can also become a symbol of rural endurance and national specificity, contrasting with the homogenising logic of global consumerism. The meme thus enables both self-parody and subtle resistance: Romania is framed as out of step, but also as preserving something authentic and unassimilated.

Thus, from the standpoint of digital literacy, the meme invites multiple readings. It requires the viewer to decode both visual anachronism and the broader 'Meanwhile in...' meme convention, which often veers into soft cultural essentialism. Romanian audiences may read it as a locally grounded in-joke, while international viewers may interpret it as evidence of exoticism or backwardness. This dual readability reflects the liminal positioning of Romanian digital identity: part of global media flows yet often framed as peripheral.

This meme could function as a symbolic interface between national identity and global meme culture. It circulates stereotypes but also transforms them into material for humour, inviting both criticism and solidarity. Through its irony and absurdity, the meme maps the contradictions of post-socialist modernisation onto a shareable image.

The meme 'Why did the Romanian stop reading? He gave the Bucharest'<sup>8</sup> hinges on phonetic play and linguistic distortion, turning the city name 'Bucharest' into a fabricated verb for 'giving up'. Visually, the meme uses a raccoon's expressive face

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<sup>8</sup> Wordplay online meme. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/romanianlolmemes/>. Accessed May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2025.



as a metaphoric stand-in for self-aware humour, enhancing the punchline's ironic tone. The animal reaction format contributes to the meme's accessibility, as does the minimal text and punchline structure.

This meme triggers several underlying stereotypes, although it seems innocently playful. It relies on the stereotype of Romanians as non-readers, invoking a discourse of intellectual deficiency. The meme's bilingual wordplay highlights and plays with the linguistic tension between Romanian and English. Though presented as light-hearted, it reinforces an image of cultural simplicity that circulates quickly within global digital platforms. Nevertheless, the meme can also be read as a strategic appropriation of that stereotype. Hence, Romanians demonstrate not linguistic incompetence, but playful fluency, bending English creatively for humorous effect. This interpretation aligns with a broader trend in Eastern European meme culture, where English is used not merely as *lingua franca*, but to support cultural negotiation and ironic self-positioning.

The use of a pun that depends on knowing both English phonetics and Romanian geography positions the meme as a cultural in-joke, requiring cross-cultural literacy to decode. In this way, it showcases digital users' language awareness and cosmopolitan humour, pushing back against simplistic images of Eastern Europe as linguistically or culturally marginal.

The meme also gains relevance within the context of Romania's relatively high English language proficiency. As of 2023, Romania ranks sixth in the English Proficiency Index for Central and Eastern Europe and the CIS region (*Statista*, 2023), suggesting that such humour circulates not from misunderstanding, but from linguistic self-confidence. The joke becomes a reflexive play on expectations, where the Romanian speaker does not 'fail' at English but performs a kind of intentional miscommunication for comic effect.

From a memetic point of view, the format's success lies in its brevity and visual familiarity. Additionally, it has a twofold function: a language-based joke and a symbolic statement of cultural fluency. The latter function is achieved by using humour to destabilise the hierarchy between native and non-native speakers. Thus, the meme reflects a broader strategy of humorous reappropriation, turning linguistic play into a form of national self-irony and digital agency.

The final example in this thematic category is a meme<sup>9</sup> which might be labelled as *'My mom makes better sarmale' – food as identity competition*.

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<sup>9</sup> My mom makes better sarmale online meme. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/romanianlolmemes/>. Accessed May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2025.

This meme adapts the widely recognizable ‘Most Interesting Man in the World’ format to claim culinary nationalism through playful provocation. The caption ‘I don’t always pick fights with Romanians, but when I do, I tell them my mom makes better sarmale’, blends cultural specificity with mock rivalry. The humour relies on the implied stereotype that Romanians take pride in their food, especially in sarmale (cabbage rolls). The name of the dish functions here as a synecdoche for national identity. The contrast between the serious appearance of the character and the exaggerated absurdity of the caption generates the ironic tension that magnifies the comedic effect.

The meme draws on several interlinked national stereotypes. First, it announces the stereotype of Romanians as fiercely proud of their culinary traditions. Second, it activates a more gendered and emotional stereotype, that Romanians (especially men) revere their mothers’ cooking to an almost sacred degree. The meme plays on ideas of emotional defensiveness and familial pride, turning them into a humorous identity badge. Questioning the quality of someone’s mother’s sarmale becomes equivalent to cultural warfare.

At a deeper level, the meme could perform a kind of diasporic self-assertion. It can be assumed that it is designed not merely for Romanians within Romania, but for a transnational audience familiar with meme culture and aware of the social weight food carries in cultural representation. The meme transforms culinary rivalry into a bonding ritual, affirming national pride without overt nationalism. It exemplifies what Michael Herzfeld (2005) has termed ‘cultural intimacy’, the recognition of stereotypes from within the community that are embraced, joked about, and re-ritualised through humour.

From a memetic perspective, the meme succeeds through a template of familiarity and affective resonance. It thrives on the intersection of meme fluency and ethnic specificity, offering a format where humour is generated by cultural exaggeration rather than cultural deficiency. In contrast to memes that ridicule national failings, this one constructs a positive stereotype that invites laughter and identification.

Finally, the meme highlights how food operates as a symbol in digital nationalism. In this case, it mediates cultural pride, maternal imagery, and linguistic wit in a shareable format. The humour may be exaggerated, but it is not self-deprecating, suggesting that memes can also celebrate national identity by encoding stereotypes as affectionate gestures.

## Discussion

The memes analysed above function as digital artefacts of cultural narration, oscillating between self-ironic humour and stereotype perpetuation. Their rhetorical strength lies

in their ambivalence: although often created and shared by Romanians, their use of English and reliance on global meme formats embed them in transnational circuits of communication. This allows them to circulate widely but also opens them to misreading, as cultural subtleties may be diluted or misunderstood by global audiences.

A recurring theme is the tension between pride and embarrassment, affectionate ridicule and enduring caricature. Memes such as *Die Hard Level: Romanian* and *Meanwhile in Romania* express a stoic, ironic awareness of Romania's post-communist contradictions. Others, like *U.S.A. vs. Romania*, stabilise essentialist images rooted in folkloric identity and rural endurance. In all cases, humour performs a dual role: it fosters cultural self-reflection while also risking the repetition of reductive tropes.

Memes also operate as visual testimonies. They archive not just jokes, but affective landscapes, cultural frustrations, and socio-political ironies. They compress collective experience into digestible formats and provide insight into how Romanians negotiate their European identity, historical legacies, and marginal status in dominant digital discourses. The tension between critique and affirmation, self-mockery and pride, is at the heart of their cultural function.

## Conclusion

This article has explored how English-language memes about Romanians function as visual rhetorical artefacts that negotiate national identity through humour, (self-) irony, and stereotype.

Drawing on interdisciplinary theories of memetic communication, visual rhetoric, and digital virality, the study argues that these short texts are significant cultural documents. They reflect the hybrid positioning of Romania as a post-communist society navigating both inherited legacies and global expectations.

The paper contributes to the field of digital visual rhetoric by offering a targeted analysis of memes about Romanians circulating in English. The analysis reveals how digital humour mediates post-socialist identity in a global context. This study demonstrates how memes become vehicles for cultural reflexivity, especially in contexts where humour serves as a coping mechanism for historical tension or marginality.

However, the present study has limitations. The meme corpus, while thematically representative, is not exhaustive. The selection method was qualitative and based on subjective criteria such as visual format, thematic relevance, and platform engagement. This has meant leaving out a broader spectrum of vernacular meme production.

Furthermore, the deliberate focus of the article only on English-language memes also constrains interpretation. Memes with text in Romanian may express different

affective or ideological subtleties worth examining. Thus, future work could consider multilingual corpora for comparative depth. Besides this research avenue, the study opens several other directions for future research. Comparative analyses of memes from other post-socialist nations (e.g., Bulgaria, Serbia, Poland) could reveal regional patterns of digital humour and stereotype negotiation. Audience reception analyses might help assess how memes are read across generational or linguistic lines. A deeper engagement with the production side, such as creator intent and meme-community dynamics, could add further details to understanding memes as both artifacts and performances of identity.

In conclusion, although memes are considered transient and primarily entertaining, their viral nature and multimodal structure allow them to encode complex cultural traits with remarkable precision. For Romanians, English-language memes become a space to perform, negotiate, and sometimes contest identity. They reflect the paradoxes of transition, the burdens of history, and the humour that binds communities across linguistic and national boundaries.

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## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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