

WINE AND SPEED: THE POST-SOVIET HOLIDAYS IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA (2001-2009)

Virgiliu Bîrlădeanu

In the context of the forceful dispute over national identity in Moldova, the Communist government of 2001–2009 aimed to articulate a project of “Moldovan identity” which was raised to the level of a state ideology. In the spirit of Soviet propaganda, this project was implemented through public holidays and celebrations. The following analysis examines two case studies – the Wine Festival and the Independence Cup – by discerning the performative practices designed as part of the nation-building project in Moldova between 2005 and 2009. Organized at the official level, but with the strong assistance of mass media, these public events were intended to win the support and attention of Moldovan society by employing rituals and performances similar to those of the Soviet period. The paper addresses the characteristics and mechanisms of these performative practices, and considers why this nation-building project did not achieve its goals, but instead caused tension and disputes. One of the main aims is to understand how the Communist government sought to redefine “the Moldovan nation”.

Keywords: *post-Soviet holidays; nation-building; performance; Republic of Moldova; Communist government*

Introduction

Since the creation of independent Moldova in 1991, the involvement of the country’s various ethnic groups in its post-Communist transition phase was uneven. For example, the majority of Moldova’s Russian-speaking population – particularly those living on the left bank of the Nistru River¹, but also those on the right bank – considered the collapse of the Soviet Union and the establishment of the Republic of Moldova as “a major historical mistake” (Fruntașu 2002: 372; Mason 2009). The process of consolidating Moldova’s statehood and democratic transition was claimed by experts to be far from complete. The most notable causes of this were “the ambiguous results of the Soviet project of building the Moldovan nation” (King 2000c: 224),

the lack of any experience of independence, except for a short period in 1917–1918”, the Transnistrian conflict, the Chișinău authorities’ vicious practice of “preferential commitments for minorities, leading to formal and constitutional changes, among others (Fruntașu 2002: 370-381).

This period was marked by an absence of a consensus on history, culture and language, as well as the persistence of Soviet ideological stereotypes in the political discourse referring to the Moldovan statehood and nation. These factors have prevented the development of a shared

understanding of citizenship affecting both the development of democratic processes and the integration of Moldova within the European Union (March 2007).

The central argument of this study is that in the political discourse of the Republic of Moldova, contrary to initial expectations, various Soviet performances and cognitive patterns were recycled, adapted and re-affirmed. Although these patterns were regarded as debased currency, in the period between 2001-2009 they were still considered to have some value in mobilizing Moldovan society and as such to fill in the gap created by the absence of more workable solutions for the transition to democracy.

The study explores how the nation-building project of the Republic of Moldova during the period 2001–2009 used forms and contents from Soviet celebrations and holidays, and how it generated new ways to “produce” and “consume” nation-related discourses. When these did not conflict, they were negotiated and reconfigured into convergent forms that could bring about social cohesion and order. I specifically examine two case studies from the Republic of Moldova: the Wine Festival and the Independence Cup as particular example of performative nation-building during the years 2001–2009.

There is a vast literature devoted to cultural dimensions of nation-building process, arguing to approach the politics of identity, memory, nostalgia as parts of social-economic transformations of the post-socialist world. Caroline Humphrey (2002) in *The unmaking of Soviet life: everyday economies after socialism* considers the effects of different cultural practices, especially consumption, as central to the creation of culture, “since it involves a process of objectification which enables material things and their discourses to become forms through which people have consciousness of themselves” (Humphrey 2002: 176). From the late 1980s onward in the post-Soviet space, “trading and consumption became ever larger aspects of the construction of social space and symbolic value” (Grant & Ries 2002: 4). However, the attempts of post-totalitarian authorities to circumscribe trading and consumption to the political projects were not a simple task and have ambiguous consequences. Therefore, relying on the concept of “evocative transcripts” (Humphrey 1994: 22-23) we can state the ambiguous aspects of the official narrative in the (post)socialist societies when the politics of memory and nation-building can represent both oppositional as well as official narrative. Following the Humphrey’ study, one can observe a similar process in the case of post-Soviet Moldova where the same language of representation is used for different purposes by actors at different places in the social hierarchy. By recycling the old and new elements of representation, symbolism and rituals, the governing regime in Moldova tried to tap into already pre-existing symbolic modalities and to extend its power and hegemony.

Referring to the “age of the masses” in Soviet Russia, as well as in Nazi Germany, fascist Italy and imperial Japan, Stephen Kotkin considers that official discourse and mobilization under authoritarian regimes, especially their symbolic dimensions, constituted key-challenges to liberal democracies:

In sum, before and especially after World War I, the bases of *national* politics moved beyond royal palaces, houses of parliament, or backrooms to army barracks, public squares, factories, sports stadiums, and the female body. Anti-liberal regimes, with varying degrees of efficacy, energetically deployed symbolic politics, mobilization campaigns, and mass organizations in mass-based dictatorships. It was a form of mass participation largely without political power, but not without substance or consequence (Kotkin 2001: 136).

In this vein, subsequent studies on building the Soviet identity emphasize the importance of the creation of a new Soviet political liturgies treated by ordinary people as “magical incantations, powerful, unchallengeable” (Kenez 1985). Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov and Ol’ga Sosnina, in their study on public display of gifts to Soviet leaders (Ссорин-Чайков & Соснина 2009) state that the Soviet culture in its many manifestations captures desirable as real, future as already existing in the present, as its peculiar museum. Literature and art of socialist realism represented life not as it is, but the way it should be and necessarily will be “in a revolutionary development”. This teleological orientation in conditions of real socialism served to spatial design of performative sites and activities.

In spite the efforts of Soviet ideology to create powerful categories with which to describe the world and to forbid the alternative discourses, - argues Karen Petrone, “they [Soviet ideologues] could not control the way that the official discourses they created were used by others or entirely eliminate alternative worldviews” (Petrone 2000: 2). Petrone argues that:

by expanding celebration culture, the Soviet state created a powerful tool for the mobilization of popular support, but it also created channels of communication that could be used for non-official purposes. Inefficiencies in Soviet cultural administration and the expanded opportunities for communication provided by the relatively open nature of the language of celebration enabled citizens from different social groups to articulate alternative and unofficial ideas about life and politics in the Soviet Union (Petrone1994: 375).

Katherine Verdery reflects on “why so many of these contests over the definition of cultural and scientific values occurred around “the Nation”” (Verdery 1991) in the case of Romania under the rule of Ceaușescu and, among other assertions, explains that the problems with Romania's command economy led to a partial modification in field of culture:

More extensively felt in domains such as literature than in others such as history, this sharpened cultural-political conflict and aroused the opposition of cultural producers whose formerly secure and protected situation had suddenly become vulnerable. (The presence of poets and critics in the post-Ceaușescu government was in part a consequence.) Because their opponents and the Party leadership phrased the struggle in terms of national identity, and because of their own commitment to the national idea, these persons too were compelled to argue their alternative values in terms of what was best for the Nation. The result was to reinforce the significance of the Nation at the center of culture, in the politics of intellectual production, and, consequently, in the discursive space of ideology and legitimation (Verdery 1991: 304).

The adoption and insistent promotion of the “Moldovan nation” discourse by the Party of the Communists from Moldova during 2001-2009 resonate with this explanation by Verdery. In the circumstances when the Republic of Moldova has been decimated by the endless economic transition and socio-political scission, the discourse and festive practices of “Moldovan nation” have been often invoked as instruments that would assure cohesion, centralization, and mobilisation of power in the hands of post-Soviet authoritarian regime.

Historical Background of the Post-Totalitarian Celebrations

The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the consolidation of national ideologies on the political stage produced spectacular changes, which were expressed through the contesting and reloading of the mechanisms through which societies are symbolically organized; through the adoption of new fundamental meanings (such as state arms, flags, uniforms, consecrated places and so on); and through the redefinition of political rituals, the calendar and public holidays. The process, however, affected many spheres, such as experiences/skills, social inertias, competing memories and political choices. Depending on the circumstances and context this process has led to various interpretations of events, and has reoriented the attention of researchers towards an evaluation not only of the continuities but also of the changes in meaning of collective ritualizations.

Vladimir Lenin believed that cinematography was “one of the most important of all the arts”; to this, Josef Stalin added in 1924 that it was also the “most important tool of propaganda” and one that must be kept under strict control (Stalin 1924; Ленин 1970: 579). These statements indicate that, during the first years of the Bolshevik dictatorship, the regime sought new tools of political pedagogy and legitimacy. Their preference for performative forms of propaganda coincided with the “arrival of the masses in history” and with the ascension of the mass media at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. In Soviet Russia, the use of these tools of propaganda was also dictated by low levels of literacy and by some aspects of traditional Russian culture. Most importantly, the emergence of these new components of political discourse took place because of opportunities that opened the way for a monopolization of political discourse, and for the formation of dominant stereotypes in the society’s collective thought and action.

In this regard, Leon Trotsky, during the first years of Soviet power, stated that merely appealing to the rationality of the masses was insufficient to cultivate an emotional attachment and loyalty. The institutions of the state and the Communist Party, in order “to consolidate the cohesion of the celebrating communities”, were instructed to evaluate their public holidays according to criteria that would encourage mass appeal and entertainment. Outdoor theatrical propagandistic representations, during the period of “war communism” (1918–1921), impressed audiences with their grandness and monumentalism. The pathos of the performances (Цехновицер 1927; Руднев 1979; Тульцева 1985), used archetypal mechanisms that brought together two dimensions – the real and the utopian – thus introducing an imaginary world of equality, brotherhood and fairness. These events involved thousands of performers and flowed through the improvised stage of the city streets, imbuing them with a mythological reality, transforming the flow of time and eliminating the differences between the desired and the real, between the present and the future (Захаров 1090: 52).

Millenniarist mythology was ambitiously adopted for state propaganda and aggressively pushed forth through the reform of the calendar, which was implemented at the beginning of 1918.² It was intended to instil in the collective imagination the belief that the era represented the beginnings of a “new age of history” and a “rupture” of the old yearly rhythms. The new mythical configuration “promised the installation of new order and of universal regeneration” (Nicoară 2006: 306-307), thus sanctifying the single-party state. Once the old world had been overthrown, an annual cycle of public festivals – designed to inspire the masses with the ideas of devotion and self-sacrifice for the party and for the proletarian revolution, and of fanaticism and rejection of its enemies – was established through various state initiatives and directives.

Within a decade, the central party authorities had arranged festivities and holidays as an aspect of ritualization and political standardization (Petroni 2000; Brandenberger 2002). Following the aims of the totalitarian-bureaucratic system – to eliminate all aspects of non-conformity and spontaneity – the holiday of 1 May was transformed in Soviet Russia into a holiday of “springtime and labour” (see also Şveţ this volume). It became an occasion on which the masses, organized in columns, were made to display their “approval and gladness” about the party’s politics, to acclaim the benefits of change, and to acknowledge the arrival of the *millenniarist dream* – Communism (Boia 2000; Boia 2005). The marches in the front of the podiums, the formalized meetings and the speeches, including the chanting of party slogans, all became indispensable aspects of Soviet celebrations. For most of the participants, the monotony of these occasions was tempered by the chance to celebrate instead of doing hard labour, by the temporary lifting of the prohibition of alcohol, and by the material wealth displayed by the authorities during the official celebrations. Taken together, these created an array of expectations in the collective consciousness, which intensified with each passing year.

The mythology of “world revolution”, “the besieged fortress” and “the evil plot” established itself as a reference point of Stalinist propaganda after the mobilization of the economy and the society; it affected most celebrations and holidays, including those related to sporting events and children. The re-enactment of violence became a characteristic trait of celebrations and mass events, with scenes of extermination, dehumanization, humiliation and the killing of the enemies of Soviet power. Military demonstrations and competitions grew in number, including shooting contests and exercises in the use of gas masks; these transmitted the idea of an unavoidable war to the collective consciousness.³

Despite the intention of the Bolshevik authorities to begin afresh with a blank slate, researchers have shown that the new set of Soviet rituals adapted many old forms of celebration, and transformed or borrowed traditional symbolic and mythological structures. Models of Christian iconography were used to indicate the new symbolic hierarchy, both in space and time, and to lend charisma to the party’s revolutionary martyrs and leaders (Bonnell 1997; Moscovici 1997).⁴ Official reports of celebrations in the first decades of Soviet power show a definitive constitution of language patterns with the ideological organization of the “nation-wide celebration of socialist culture” (Правда 1937).⁵

Within a relatively short period, the planning and organization of “mass activities”, and the people’s participation in them, became political acts regulated by multiple “norms”. They were “monitored” by numerous commissions and institutions, which were authorized to control and collect information relating to the implementation of “cultural plans” and to the people’s attitudes towards them. Model programs detailed instructions covering all aspects of the celebrations, from the list of slogans to be displayed to the way the streets should be illuminated. These programs were formulated to accord with the directives of the party and its projects of identity engineering (see Fritzche & Hellbeck 2009). The dramaturgy of political propaganda in the Soviet Union over its seven decades evolved into a complex system, which allowed the totalitarian regime to stage the much-wanted reality, and to show the people the only path to integrate in the social field and the construction of a collective identity. The whole country became a theatre of triumphant socialism, with the masses simultaneously playing the roles of performer and audience; this theatre was dominated by uniform *patterns* of thought, communication and discipline, and by norms and instructions that were prescribed or implied.

The Post-Soviet Politics of (Performing) the Nation-Building

Events that took place in the Republic of Moldova at the beginning of 1990s resulted in the exclusion from the official calendar of certain holidays that were associated in the public memory with the nation's Soviet past. These included the Anniversary of the October Revolution (7 November); Constitution Day (7 October); Soviet Army Day (23 February); Komsomol Day (29 May); Pioneers' Day (19 May); and Militia Day (10 November). In their place, some religious holidays (such as Christmas and Holy Easter) were reinstalled, as were several holidays dedicated to the new political discourse: these included [Romanian] Language Day (31 August) and Independence Day (27 August). At the same time, some holidays that had been celebrated during the Soviet era were preserved: Women's Day (8 March); Labour Day (1 May); and Victory Day (9 May). However, their reconfiguration as national Moldovan holidays did not mean that their Soviet were forgotten in the collective consciousness. A distinct segment of the Republic of Moldova, even today, two decades after the proclamation of independence, still celebrates Soviet Army Day (23 February) and the Anniversary of the October Revolution (7 November), and is indifferent to the newly created official celebrations: Our [Romanian] Language Day (31 August) and Independence Day (27 August). In addition, because there has been a lack of agreement between those who promote these two identity projects – conventionally designated as “Romanian” and “Moldovan” – the conceptualization of these holidays as sources of national unity has been ambiguous.⁶

The Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova, led by Vladimir Voronin, a general of the Ministry of Domestic Affairs under the Soviet regime, came to power in the spring of 2001 on a wave of nostalgia for the Soviet period. The arrival of this Communist government marked the beginning of a new stage of “the Moldovan nation-building project”. The political recycling of the concepts of “the Moldovan identity”, “the Moldovan nation” and “the Moldovan language”, which were raised to the level of a state ideology, in accordance with the party's projects, was meant to serve as a basis for social cohesion and to provide the “symbolic legitimization of statehood”. The extensive attempts by the political authorities to “invent traditions” (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983) occurred against the backdrop of the well-known rejection of the “Moldovanism” project by intellectuals, who regarded it as a Stalinist and an anti-national project, which led to the state investing additional resources and administrative actions. The point of equilibrium was easily exceeded by the returning the images of the State and “Moldovan Nation” into the mythological discourse's perimeter through the revigoration of the Soviet ideological patterns, and the pseudo-religious pathos that has affirmed its exclusiv right to appeal to and articulate the image of spiritual recovery. Personification and the transcendental subjectivity of the collective entity (Nicoară 2006: 130) have provided for the transfer of sacredness and a mystical environment to feed the speculative constructions of destiny, vocation, unity, harmony and eternity of Moldovan nation.⁷ Celebrated ostentatiously, the events dedicated to the anniversaries of Moldavian statehood eclipsed other official commemorations and celebrations, creating a repertoire of propagandistic preferences that were promoted by official directives.

On 6 November 2007, President Voronin issued a decree declaring 2009 to be “the 650th anniversary of the foundation of the Moldovan state”; he asserted that this marked the culmination of the ideological project of building the “Moldovan nation”. On 21 January 2009, the government of the Republic of Moldova approved an action plan for state institutions at all levels; under this plan, two state awards were created: the Order of Bogdan the First the Founder,

and the commemorative medal entitled “650 Years from the Foundation of the Moldovan State”. There was also a plan to institute a pre-university course of lectures called “Moldova – trecut și contemporanietate” (Moldova – Past and Present), and to allocate funds for films on the same theme; these included an artistic movie and several documentary films. The Ministry of Culture was made responsible for coming up with a symbol and slogan for the jubilee, which would “be used for all performances and events during the celebration” (Planul de acțiuni consacrate... 2009).

A state commission was created for the organization of celebrations and festive occasions, while the National Bank and the Moldovan Postal Service announced that new stamps and anniversary coins would be issued at the beginning of 2009. The State Information Agency (Moldpres) and the National Public Audiovisual Company (Teleradio-Moldova), following the official directives, launched a “campaign to inform the population and to reflect on the activities dedicated to the celebration of the 650th anniversary of the Moldovan state”. The State Forestry Agency (Moldsilva), in response to the governmental directive to plant a park of 650 oaks in April 2009, presented its own plan “to plant 500,000 oaks in the autumn of 2009”. The Ministry of External Affairs and European Integration, in cooperation with the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the Office for Inter-Ethnic Relationships and the Academy of Sciences of Moldova, planned to organize a series of scientific events; these included international, national and regional conferences and round tables with the theme “Statehood of Moldova: History and Modern Times. Symbols of National Identity”. They also planned a competition of scientific, artistic and journalistic creations dedicated to the 650th anniversary of the foundation of the Moldovan state. Finally, they designed cultural events dedicated to the anniversary, such as exhibitions, concerts and days celebrating Moldovan culture (see also Cojocari & Dimova this volume).

The Agency of Sport organized competitions of traditional Moldovan sports, such as *trânta* (wrestling), *buzdugan* (mace) throwing contests, and *oina* (a bat-and-ball game). Other ministries and state departments were instructed to ensure that their annual agendas incorporated celebrations of the anniversary. The authorities also directed that the 2009 International Music Festival “Mărțișor” should be dedicated to the 650th anniversary of the Moldovan state. Various other celebratory events were organized: the National Festival of National Traditions and Customs “Satul Moldovenesc” (Moldovan Village); a national festival of folk songs “Moldova – dragoste și dor” (Moldova – Love and Longing); a contest of painting and photography “Natura Moldovei în viziunea copiilor” (Moldova’s Nature Through Children’s Eyes), which actively involved children from the Transnistrian region and had as its theme “How much I treasure this land”; and the inauguration and launching by Teleradio-Moldova of an interactive television program entitled “100 de moldoveni celebri din istoria Moldovei” (100 Famous Moldavians from the History of Moldova). Finally, a festive concert was scheduled for the end of 2009, dedicated to the celebration of “the 650th Anniversary of the Foundation of the Moldovan state” (Planul de acțiuni consacrate... 2009: 2-4).

Although many of these plans were purely formal or were cancelled in the wake of the events of 7 April 2009⁸, those organized under the direct patronage of President Voronin may be considered as performative acts aimed to recall and reproduce the mythology and the symbolism of the ideological project of building the “Moldovan nation”. The sacred drama was intended to be represented by a visual series that would display, using “liturgical” language, the roots and the originality of the nation’s traditions, the hospitality its people, the sacredness of the land, its

time-honoured frontiers (which were guarded by medieval fortresses for so long), the deeds of its heroes, the testimonies of its chroniclers, and President Voronin's "parental" care for the restoration of its monasteries, churches and so on (Borșevici 2009). This abundance of mythological forms and references coincided with a rapid degradation of Moldova's democratic institutions in the years 2005–2009, and, in my view, with the affirmation of an authoritarian political system.

As a consequence of this, the official discourse promoted in these years relied on the interpretations adapted from "great mythological constructs": "conspiracy", "the Saviour", "the Golden Age". The conflict over national identity – waged by the political authorities and the majority of the intellectual elites – caused disorder in education, and confusion and tension in state institutions. Thus, Teleradio-Moldova was pressured by the authorities to redefine its activities. It was to exclude the term "Romanian" from its broadcasts, and to promote media projects that would support the discourse affirming the symbolic legitimacy of everything considered "exclusively Moldovan". For example, various events – such as the inauguration of new streets, monuments, foundation stones, gas pipelines and construction projects, and celebrations of the "the Moldovan multi-national people" – were given particular attention in the media.⁹

Celebrating the Independence, Building the Nation

The case of the Independence Cup The Independence Cup represents a sports competition of car rally dedicated to the Independence Day of the Republic of Moldova. The event was inaugurated in 2005 "under the high patronage of President Voronin" and transformed by the national authorities into a major televised event of the year. In 2006, in the official program of the Independence Day celebrations, the only reference to the Independence Cup national car rally was a ceremony for the decoration of the victors, which was listed as one of the cultural and artistic events dedicated to the theme "Moldova – My Motherland" and to the fifteenth anniversary of Independence. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism declared in a press conference that Independence Day would be inaugurated "by the ringing of bells in all the holy places of the country", accompanied by a "divine service and the laying of flowers at the monuments of the heroes fallen for the territorial integrity and independence of the state". This plan of action, although it showed a symbolic order, had neither great significance nor an ability to mobilize the people, as other political projects started by the Communist government had done.

In its third edition, in 2007, however, the Federation of Automobile Sports of the Republic of Moldova presented the competition as "not only a sports event, but also the cultural event of the year"; it was described as "an authentic show of performance engines, a confrontation between technical capabilities and human characters". Teleradio-Moldova mentioned that the idea of the competition belonged to the President of the Republic of Moldova, Vladimir Voronin, and stressed that the event was conceived as "an important project in the life of the capital and of the entire Republic". On 1 August 2007

an aggressive campaign for the promotion of this event will be organized in all available mass media: TV Moldova 1, TV Moldova International, Radio Moldova National, Radio Moldova International, "Teleradio" newspaper (25,000 copies) (Rally Cupa Independenței 2007).

The event took place on 25–26 August, with sixteen automobiles participating in the race of 1300 kilometres. The rally officially started on the morning of 25 August at the Great National Assembly Square in the capital city Chişinău. The “16 cars driven by 16 sportsmen” were to travel through sixteen localities – Chişinău, Orhei, Şoldăneşti, Soroca, Drochia, Bălţi, Făleşti, Ungheni, Hânceşti, Leova, Cantemir, Cahul, Giurgiuleşti, Comrat, Căuşeni, Chişinău – traversing roads of both good and poor quality. The number “16”, which was present throughout the competition was intended to signify sixteen years since the proclamation of independence of the Republic of Moldova (27 August 1991). The celebration of Independence Day continued on 27 August, with a traditional religious service at the Metropolitan Cathedral “Our Lord’s Birth” of Chişinău, the laying of flowers at the monument of Ştefan cel Mare şi Sfânt, shows and “demonstrative exercises of martial arts, acrobatics, sports gymnastics, sports dances and cycling competitions” at the Great National Assembly Square,

For the next year, 2008, Teleradio-Moldova announced new regulations for that year’s Independence Cup Rally, which would have seventeen national crews. The celebratory start of the race would take place on 23 August and end on 24 August. The event was to be broadcast by Moldova 1 and Radio Moldova, which adjusted their programs to allow two days of live transmission from the competition route. The race was opened in a highly theatrical manner. There was a stage for speeches by the “state officials”; a red carpet was laid directly over the cracked asphalt of the Great National Assembly Square; the Presidential Orchestra was invited to play; and bikers from the Eagles Club were also present. “Real lessons of manhood” were demonstrated by the border guards. The authorities, the national television and the participants were thanked for their efforts, while the commentators repeatedly stressed the additional value and significance of the 2008 edition of the race, which marked the seventeenth anniversary of the independence of the Republic of Moldova; this was especially meaningful since seventeen was considered the “age of legal adulthood”¹⁰.

The route contained seventeen stops in the south, north, east and west of the Republic, including on the left and right banks of the Nistru River, and it twice crossed the capital city. The selection of the seventeen localities was symbolic: they were chosen to “trace” the symbolic coordinates in the centre and on the periphery of the Republic of Moldova, and so to plot an axis of unity and territorial integrity. The “mapping” of the nation’s space was launched in a spirit of festivity and legendary “topography”. The spirit of the “Moldovan nation” was celebrated at each of the seventeen stations on the route, where, amid the flashes of cameras, the local authorities enacted their hospitality, displayed their wealth and covered up their day-to-day problems.

In Coşniţa, in the district of Dubăsari, the rally participants were welcomed as heroes and laid flowers at the local monument to the Transnistrian conflict. From the live broadcast, one could hear two expressions made repeatedly: “We will manage to unify the country!” and “For the country, for the people!” The patriotic message about the territorial integrity of the country was articulated most forcefully in this village, which sits on the left bank of the Nistru River. The mayor of Coşniţa said in an interview:

We are the first village hosting the Independence Cup Rally, and we, the people from the left bank of the Nistru, a part of the Republic of Moldova, where the people have been suffering for seventeen years but will keep on struggling for the independence of the Republic of Moldova, here, on the left bank of the Nistru

River. We feel satisfaction and are proud that, for the second time, the rally is on the left bank of the Nistru River, thus demonstrating the territorial unity of the Republic of Moldova. [...] In the first place, the rally certainly holds a patriotic significance for us – it signifies the territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova.¹¹

From Orhei, where a *greasing* competition was organized, the rally proceeded two hours late to the “heart of Soroca”. In the city of Soroca masses of supporters were in evidence, accompanying the cars in special busses. A stop was made at the medieval fortress, and media reports were produced in the natural environment, in order to personify the origins and the north-eastern frontiers of the nation. The local authorities ranked the race favourites, and presented them with gifts. In Edineț and Rîșcani, the local authorities awarded prizes and organized musical performances. In Bălți, the participants were met at the square containing the city’s most important monuments; they were welcomed with bread and salt, a parade of soldiers and patriotic military competitions. The local officials stated that

the rally is an exhibition of the unity (*sic*) of the Republic of Moldova . . . [it is] a lesson in manhood, a decoration for the celebration of independence . . . [in which] we have the chance to show who we are and how we are.¹²

The deplorable roads and the technical breakdowns, along with the local festivities, which regularly exceeded their allotted time, resulted in a general delay in the schedule, which led to the towns of Făleşti, Călărași and Giurgiulești – three of the seventeen that were to be visited and that would be part of the celebration’s significance and enthusiasm – being bypassed. At the same time, the rally lost its sporting dimension. One commentator on Moldova-1 said:

By the way, so as not to be accused of improperly organizing the rally, several spectators have called us saying, ‘You are jesters because you are not making a rally but a demonstration of racing’. It is true, we did not intend to have a better race than the Paris–Dakar, we just want to demonstrate that the seventeen years of independence have not simply passed us by, we just want you to simply go from one village to another and enjoy yourself, together with our participants, but not to demonstrate that we are a power here, we have expensive cars to scare you when they press down the accelerator pedal.

On 24 August, having started again in Chișinău, the competition continued with several incidents on the road: one automobile was burnt and two dropped out due to technical problems. The remaining fourteen automobiles went to Căpriană, where the *serpentine* test was organized; they then proceeded to the districts of Hâncești, Cahul, Comrat and Cimișlia. In Căușeni, at the Volunteers’ Square, the rally was greeted “with bread and salt” and “gifts from the Căușeni area” (for more on this traditional welcoming practice see Cash this volume). By that time in Bălți and Chișinău the preparations for the celebrations dedicated to the Operation Iași–Chișinău of World War Two had begun. They were organized according the program of the Communist government, and included military marches and meetings of war veterans, which were broadcast by the mass media with the same enthusiasm. Despite the fact that the celebration of the “liberation of August 1944” is seen by most historians of the Republic of Moldova as the beginning of a new occupation of Bessarabia, an official meeting took place at the Memorial

Complex “Șerpeni Bridgehead”. It was a theatrical performance, with wreaths of flowers, the launching of sixty-four doves and 300 tricolour balloons by a group of children in red caps, and the imitation of war-related scenes staging the assault on the fascist fortifications. The presence of President, Vladimir Voronin, underlined the significance of the sacrifice made by the “liberating heroes”. Voronin said that:

Skimming through the pages of our history, we convince ourselves once again that the road map, full of sacrifices of the Soviet soldier who went through the fire of the Second World War and liberated the Moldova’s territory from the fascist occupation in August 1944, makes a close link between past, present and future of our peoples (Pagina Oficială a Președintelui Republicii Moldova 2008).

The rally ended at the Great National Assembly Square in Chișinău, where, on the evening of 24 August, the participants were congratulated and the winners were decorated by the president. In his congratulatory message, President Voronin stated that:

[. . .] this rally takes place on the eve of the anniversary of the proclamation of the sovereignty and independence of the Moldavian state – the Republic of Moldova. On these days dedicated to our national holiday, many events are organized that, in our opinion . . . speak to the fact that our citizens treasure the efforts and the events that are important for Independence Day, and through this they demonstrate that we all – the entire country, the entire nation – we all plead and struggle for the consolidation and development of our country, in order to build a democratic, prosperous and . . . democratic Moldova.¹³

Representing the general perception of ordinary people, the press noted that in its fourth edition, the event lost a lot of its competitive sporting nature, having become a simple pompous action aimed at the promotion of governors and their interests.

The roads, most of which were in an extremely bad state, caused the breakdown of four automobiles out of the seventeen that took part in the rally. Dozens of people, from various parts of the country, faced inconveniences on their way to the capital, since some roads had been blocked by the organizers of the Independence Cup (Cupa Independenței a creat ambuteiaje prin republică 2007). Moreover, the the government was accused that in 2007 they had replaced the name “Independence Day” with the name “the Day of the Republic”, with the aim of overshadowing Our [Romanian] Language Day, which had been adopted by the parliament on 23 June 1990. In internet forums opinions were divided. Some admired the competition, while others made fun of it, repeating a frequently heard joke: The Independence Cup rally tested all the potholes on the country’s roads in two days. The Cup was awarded to the driver of the most resilient car to reach the finish.

Finally, the Independence Cup rally created contradictory impressions among the public, as it combined aspects of the central administrative system with some elements of sports competitions and television shows. The national space was mapped by creating an itinerary that visited sacred places, fortresses, battlefields, hills, wells and so on, all of which are rooted in the collective memory of the population. The 2008 edition of the Independence Cup, in my view, recalled elements of Soviet ideological tourism, to the detriment of the sporting dimension of the competition, which was only evident in some stages.

The case of Wine Festival Between 2001 and 2009 the government of the Republic of Moldova also placed a distinct emphasis on mythical version of history as a source of legitimacy, often relying upon a “memory” of a mythical time and introducing myths about the Golden Age. A link with transcendental values was created through political ritualization that centered on unity, continuity and community, while the restoration of the mythical time could have been more easily described by using symbols from the collective imagination. Thus, the government decided to promote the tradition of “honouring with wine” (*a cinsti vinul*), which has been attested as “the most codified, most controlled, and most established ritual” of the Bessarabian Romanians (Buzilă 2006: 497).

The Wine Festival of the Republic of Moldova fitted perfectly into the political liturgy and, between 2006 and 2008, was raised to a national event, called National Wine Day.¹⁴ Currently, it is celebrated in the second week of October each year, at the Great National Assembly Square. Prior to October 2004, it was organized as the Wine Holiday at the Moldexpo Exhibitions Centre in Chişinău, given that at that time this occasion was considered as a promotion of Moldova’s most important export. The official press releases for National Wine Day between 2002 and 2005 described special activity programs that had been created. These were intended to “increase the culture of wine-making, to consolidate national traditions in the most important parts of the national economy, to maintain the prestige of the wines, as well as to attract foreign tourists to Moldova with interesting cultural programs” (Programul Festivalului Vinului 2003).

The celebrations included parades of winemakers, wine fairs, professional and public wine-tasting events, competitions, lotteries, promotional campaigns, forums featuring specialists on wine and other alcoholic drinks, business meetings and concerts performed by various artists. The *décor* and the country-specific objects gave a “profoundly national tone to the celebration: casks, wine presses, carts, huts, taverns, wineries, peasants’ yards, *casa mare* [traditional guest room] and even fortresses”; all these directed the “imagination of visitors to the history of the nation and the wine industry” (Bilanţul “Sărbătorii Vinului – ediţia 2004” 2004). The parade of wine-makers and wine-growers reminded the people of the wedding processions of a bygone era – it included various historical and mythological characters and symbols, such as “governors of Moldova, queens, mythological personages, as well as Dionysus – the god of wine, the doves of peace” (Bilanţul “Sărbătorii Vinului – ediţia 2004” 2004).

The fifth edition of the Wine Festival began on 7–8 October 2006, with some changes that aimed to raise the prominence of “the originality of Moldavian popular culture”, whose significance and unity was reflected in its traditions of producing and enjoying wine.¹⁵ The main state broadcaster changed the way in which it had been reporting the Festival in previous years; for this edition, it produced a full and live broadcast of the Festival including coverage of the official inauguration, the *hora* [a traditional dance] and the parade of winemakers, a performance of the “Ode to Winemakers” and other artistic programs organized by winemaking companies, awards ceremonies, musical performances, and visits to wineries and monuments (Programul “Festivalului Vinului 2006” 2006).

The official inauguration of the festival had a particularly sacred dimension, with state officials on the main stage making speeches and tasting wine from a large ceremonial glass. The importance of the political participants was confirmed when the artistic program, which took place in the public square, was directed towards the stage. The “Ode to Winemakers” included images from the legendary past, the mythic creation of a community with sacred and select

origins and without internal contradictions, schisms or dissidence. The visual metaphor culminated in a scene depicting the collection of grapes from all regions of the country, which were then trampled in a tub on a second stage in a “traditional” dance created for the event. This “altar for the Motherland”, and the allegoric christening of the nation, was performed for the television cameras, which thus became tools of political theatre. Meanwhile, the spectators in the square had lost their original role as the audience of the festive drama. At the 2007 and 2008 festivals, the crowd was fenced off; the part of the crowd nearest to the action – which mostly comprised members of the artistic groups, security officers and state officials, in traditional garments – performed the role of a supportive and joyful audience.

Not coincidentally, in 2008, on the same day that the Wine Festival took place in Chişinău, the Third Congress of the Moldavian Diaspora was convened so that “Moldovans from abroad” might join the celebrations.¹⁶ The Congress was organized under the auspices of the Office of Interethnic Relationships. There were 250 delegates, who, according to the organizers, represented Moldovans from eighteen countries around the world. The Speaker of the Parliament, Marian Lupu, said in a speech that the event was of great importance as there were numerous Moldavians settled abroad who should have a constant and permanent relationship with their country of origin. Lupu also noted that, despite the fact that “some people”, especially in the context of the forthcoming elections, “considered Moldavian statehood as having a temporary character, the Republic of Moldova continued to be a viable and forward-looking state that should be continuously consolidated” (Federiuc 2008).

Despite the fact that the majority of attention was given to the festivities at the Great National Assembly Square in Chişinău, special activities were also organized in regional areas. The authorities of Găgăuzia declared that, in their territory, the Wine Festival would be celebrated twice: once in October, as stipulated by the government in Chişinău, and once in November, following their local traditions. Others also considered that the timing of the festival was poorly chosen, since October was the grape-harvesting and processing season: it was then that the work of wine-producers was most intensive. In rural communities – where there was a traditional belief that it was improper for those who do not produce their own wine to purchase and drink the wine of others in the centre of the village – there was reticence towards the wine festivals organized by local administrators.

In Ialoveni the local authorities refused to organize the “wine celebrations” recommended by the government. Instead, in a sign of protest against the inability of the Communist government to provide farmers with the chance to benefit from the results of their labours – by selling their grapes and other products – the Ialoveni authorities organized a demonstration. It was intended to be a “response to the pompous collective drunken festival under the guidance of the top officials of the Republic of Moldova”. A truck full of grapes and a cask of sour wine were deposited in the central square of the town in order to complete the atmosphere of protest and express the farmers’ attitude to the indifference and cynicism of the state authorities.

Anastasia Moroz, from the village of Puhoi in the district of Ialoveni, claimed that “modern agriculture and communism are incompatible. The governors speak of European integration, while the agriculture is totally backwards” (Informational Site 2008). Others expressed similar opinions in newspaper interviews when asked about the significance of the Festival:

National Wine Day is a day of emotions, but not for the ordinary people who are looking for wine for free – they don’t actually realize that sometimes they’re

drinking water with sugar and colouring agents. It is a day for those who cultivate grapes, who make wines – natural ones – and try to sell them somewhere . . . Obviously, Moldovan “culture” does not know what a celebration truly is. A celebration is a day when you have nothing to do but celebrate, but here we have a situation where “the house is burning and the old lady is doing her hair”. In the very middle of the harvest time, all of Chişinău is celebrating . . . The true winemakers celebrate but only at the end of the season, when the harvesting is over and the wine is “put” where it should be (Victor, forty-two years old).

It will take a long time for the Moldovan people to understand what the word “celebration” means (Crina, twenty-six years old).

The interviews at the Great National Assembly Square record diverse opinions that vary according to age and social position, but which do not reflect the official discourse promoted by the authorities:

The Great National Assembly Square? In 1991, here was where the national renaissance took place. Here was where everyone who understood that there was an urgent need for a national liberation movement came. And now I see nothing but a big drunken celebration and a heap of bottles! (Iuliana, student).

Contrary to these opinions, Nicolae, sixty-seven years old, said that he used to come to the Great National Assembly Square when “serious events, such as the Day of Wine (*sic*) are organized” and not “to stupidities of this type, organized by the parties”. He came because the day was “our pride”: “the Day of Wine began here and will spread to the districts” (Nani 2008).

Concluding Remarks

The departure from office of the Party of Communists from Moldova, following the events of 7 April 2009, led to significant changes in how public holidays have been organized and how to convey different ideological implications. The Independence Cup became primarily a sporting competition once again, while the 2009 and 2010 editions of the Wine Festival were transferred from the Great National Assembly Square back to the “Moldexpo” Exhibition Center. With the disappearance of the strong ideological element, a search for a new identity for the Wine Festival began. This search has included debates about the name of the celebration (should it be the Day of Wine, the Wine Festival, the National Day of Wine, or even the Golden Autumn?), and about its true purpose (should it be a celebration of wine or a tourist attraction?). The location and timing of the celebration were discussed, as were questions about its organizers and sponsors, and about how to implement European standards in future years.

Evidently, often, ritual production and consumption practices can fortify or generate experiences of national identities (Fox & Miller-Idriss 2008). Social conventions and cultural competition can extend these identities’ significance, contents and format by means of the mass media, in order to maintain the definitions of an imagined community, but they do not avoid social negotiation. The lack of public consensus about national identity in the Republic of Moldova provoked the authorities in the years 2001–2009 to attempt to immediately and forcefully resolve the problem by promoting an ideology of “Moldovanism”. The peak period of this project coincided with the second term of President Vladimir Voronin (2005–2009). With no

experience of other forms of social engineering, except for those that were implemented during the Soviet era, the government adopted Soviet performative patterns.

The abundance displayed during the Independence Cup and the Wine Festival, along with the representation of exaggerated festivities, were completely at odds with the everyday reality in the Republic of Moldova: poor roads, heavy work on the farm, a lack of markets for wine and grapes, and general poverty. During the period 2001–2009, then, “wine” and “speed” became metaphors of political theatre intended to consolidate feelings of unity and the sacredness of the Motherland and the nation, and to bestow ideas of tradition and modernity to the project of “Moldovan” nation-building. Both holidays ceased to function as public or private occasions and were managed exclusively by the central authorities. The authoritarianism, the paternalism and the primordialism of the political message became associated with contemporary ways of “producing” and “consuming” the nation. As a consequence, however, they provoked disagreement and objection among the audience.

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Notes

- [1] With the support of the 14th Army, a separatist republic was self-proclaimed in the Transnistrian region.
- [2] In 1918, the *Sovnarkom* adopted the Gregorian calendar, according to which 14 February would immediately follow 31 January.
- [3] The celebrations for the Red Army and the Border Guard instituted by the Soviet government in 1920 were augmented in 1933 with a celebration for the Air Force (on the third Sunday in August), in 1936 with a celebration for Railway Workers (on the first Sunday in August), and in 1939 with a celebration for the Marine Military Navy (on the last Sunday in June). Voluntary military associations implemented campaigns to train the population for any future war; this explains why, in 1937, the staff of the Bolshoi Theatre of Moscow included 350 riflemen, snipers and trained machine-gunners.
- [4] In November 1935, a month after he declared that “the life has become better and jollier”, Josef Stalin ordered the return – “for the Soviet children” – of the New Year tree, and then ordered a national commemoration for the 100-year anniversary of the death of the great Russian poet A.S. Pushkin (see Александров 1937). Thus, by 16 December 1935, national and republican committees had been established, as well as departments to organize the celebrations in cities, towns and rural localities, in state institutions, kolkhozes, factories, schools and universities. The official commemorative program, both in the centre and at the outskirts of the empire, included solemn meetings, sessions, conferences and other events. The streets of all villages were decorated with posters and stands, which were illustrated with thematic content that would focus the people’s imagination onto the new festive sensibility. In Moscow, a meeting and a flower-laying ceremony at the site of the “new” monument of the poet directed the symbolic content of the ceremony towards the act of establishing, which would emphasize the capacity of the political regime to generate new ideas, and to signify and immortalize its own efficiency in immemorial achievements. On 13 February 1937 the Academy of Sciences organized a conference that presented Pushkin in terms of his dominant ideology, suggesting that he was a “materialist and atheist”, an “enemy of ignorance”, and a “great realist, whose true image was hidden by obscurants and coward liberals” (Александров 1937: 494). Andrei Bubnov, the chairman of the Commissariat of Education, announced at the inauguration of the celebrations by radio to all country: “Pushkin is ours! Only in the country of socialist culture is the name of the immortal genius surrounded by love; only in our country have the creations of Pushkin become a national patrimony. Pushkin belongs to the people who, under the guidance of Lenin and Stalin, have constructed a socialist society. He belongs to the nations of the USSR that, under the flag of Lenin and Stalin, are now advancing towards Communism” (Александров 1937: 492-493).
- [5] The placement of the mummified corpse of the leader of the global proletariat in a Mausoleum in Red Square made the place a sacred centre of the Soviet Empire; it was visited by thousands of pilgrims.
- [6] In order to emphasize their vision of ethnic, religious, historical and cultural identity, the authorities initiated a series of changes to the form and content of official celebrations. For example, in 2007 Independence Day was renamed as the Day of the Republic, which resulted in the key non-governing parties expressing their opposition: “Our nation celebrates Independence Day, not the Day of the Republic” (Serafim Urechean, president of the

political party Alianța Moldova Noastră; “We voted for independence, and that is the event we should celebrate” (Mihai Ghimpu, vice-president of the Liberal Party). The original name of the holiday was reinstated at the beginning of 2010. New celebrations were also instituted: 27 April became National Flag Day, while 2 March became Commemoration Day for the Heroes Fallen for the Integrity of Moldova in 1991–1992. Many political debates followed a presidential decree dated 24 June 2010, which declared 28 June as the Day of Soviet Occupation.

- [7] Vladimir Voronin declared on 30 January 2009 that “650 years ago on the map of Europe appeared a new state – Moldova, Moldavia. This country had some changes of delineation and borders, sometimes it disappeared, but every time it reappeared again and again. And every time – under the same name! . . . It took our ancestors many efforts and long centuries of hard challenge for the continuous thread of our country and nation to see Moldova sovereign, European, modern and independent, a country that is again ready for a long independent journey in history, a country where all changes will only be done for the best.” (Republica Moldova 2009)
- [8] On 7 April 2009 mass demonstrations took place in the Republic of Moldova which resulted with a fall of Communist government.
- [9] This expression was traced by the government from the Soviet ideology concept “многонациональный советский народ” (the multinational Soviet people).
- [10] The director of the Moldova-1 television station, Adela Railean, said in an interview for Moldova-1 at 23 August 2008: “For us, the television people, this project – the Independence Cup – is one of the most important. We highly appreciate it, and now we are working hard on it for the fourth year in a row. The most important fact for us is that this project is the first to bring the entire country together, as the participants are to visit all the corners of the country. The project perfectly fits in to the series of events dedicated to the Day of the Republic.”
- [11] From a Moldova-1 television report on 23 August 2008.
- [12] From a Moldova-1 television report on 23 August 2008.
- [13] From the live broadcast of the prize-giving ceremony for the participants of the rally at the Great National Assembly Square, 24 August 2008.
- [14] National Wine Day was instituted by the Parliamentary Decree of the Republic of Moldova no. 1005-XV of 19 April 2002, according to which it must be organized on the second Sunday of October.
- [15] On 8 October 2005, Vladimir Voronin stated that: “The Wine Festival has become a celebration characteristic of Moldova. From year to year, the festival becomes more and more important and becomes some sort of business card for Moldova” (BASA-Press 2005); Petru Lucinschi, the ex-president of the Republic of Moldova, in an interview in 2007, said: “One should know that wine and the Moldavian people are synonyms” (interview broadcasted by Moldova-1).
- [16] Remarkably, the communities of Moldavian diaspora are often divided according to their adhesion to either the “Moldovan” or “Romanian” identity. Between 2001 and 2009, the Communist government preferred to establish and maintain relationships only with the segment of the diaspora loyal to its official ideology.

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