

# Capitalism, Nationalism, and Religious Revival: Transformations of the Ritual Cycle in Postsocialist Moldova

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## Abstract

Throughout history, largescale political and economic changes have often correlated with change in the observance of holidays and the ritual cycle, reflecting and enabling the appearance of new ideologies and practices related to work. This is especially true for the modern period, both from the initial appearance of capitalism and industrialism, and in the twentieth-century efforts of states to engineer and better control economic development. The Soviet Union and other socialist states, for example, transformed the cycle of annual holidays celebrated by their populations with the intent of spreading political ideology and increasing economic productivity and efficiency. While there is a small but rich literature about the surprising effects of these policies, there has been no sustained study of post-Soviet or postsocialist transformations in ritual cycles and their connection to changing economic practices and ideologies. This paper represents a preliminary attempt to analyze the impacts of capitalism, nationalism, and religious revival as influences on transformations in the ritual cycle of postsocialist Moldova.

Keywords: ritual cycle, ritual change, postsocialism, Moldova, holidays, celebrations

## Introduction

Over the past two decades, relatively little attention has been given to the topic of changing ritual cycles during postsocialism. This is so despite the importance given by the socialist regimes themselves to the ritual calendar, and to the establishment of new ritual cycles as part of the process of building socialism<sup>2</sup>. Wide-ranging historical and cross-cultural studies also indicate a frequent coincidence of changes in the ritual cycle with largescale political and economic transformation, suggesting that postsocialism should also have been occasioned by significant changes in ritual life. In the early years of the postsocialist transition, communities throughout Eurasia responded to economic hardship and the collapse of institutional safety nets both by withdrawing from ritual activity (Creed 2002) and by intensifying their participation in such events as weddings, feasts, and festivals (Werner 1999). But what have the overall impacts of transition been on local ritual cycles? And what have been the major influences on these transformations?

The following pages focus on the Republic of Moldova as a case study. I propose a preliminary analysis of changes in the ritual cycle as it is experienced in rural Moldova, in which I consider the influence of economic transformation (capitalism), nationalism, and religious revival. The paper is based on nine months of fieldwork in 2009-2010 in the village of Răscăieți, near Moldova's southeastern border with Ukraine.

## Transformations of Ritual Cycles

Ritual calendars are both sign and symbol of power structures and social hierarchy (Burman 1981). Institutions that control calendars exercise significant power in shaping

individual and collective experience. In part the power derived from controlling rituals is related to their content and meaning, but control over the cycle of rituals observed and celebrated is more fundamentally related to the definition and control of time itself. For example, even the hour, the day, and the week are temporal constructs emerging out of religious rituals associated with Judaeo-Christian tradition (Muir 1997: 72-79, Zerubavel 1981). Even though the time units themselves have now been emptied of their original religious meaning, their universal acceptance reflects a historical process in which the Judaeo-Christian tradition has dominated social life on a global scale. In the modern period, economic and political institutions have also recognized the power of controlling rituals and time. Early capitalists struggled for a few hundred years to break the influence of the church's established cycle of holidays and feasts over the working habits of their workers (Thompson 1967), while all new European political regimes since the French Revolution have sought to adjust the ritual cycle according to their dominant ideology (Ozouf 1988).

Indeed, the ritual calendar was a site of ongoing manipulation by the socialist regimes throughout Eastern Europe. In the early years of the Soviet Union, for example, new holidays (and the abolition of others) commemorated the revolution, and sought to implement new social values specific to a socialist society (Binns 1979a). Over time, however, the functions of new rituals changed. During the 1930s, for example, public celebrations emphasized "joy" and prosperity, signaling to citizens, the state, and the international community that Soviet citizens lived well and supported the state (Petrone 1994:26). After Stalin's death, the Soviet ceremonial calendar expanded rapidly during the 1960s, in a continued effort to legitimize Soviet rule as well as provide leisure for Soviet citizens (Binns 1979a:589). Many of these new holidays were "homeopathic," imitating and overlaying preexisting folk holidays and rituals, especially in Ukraine and the other western republics (Binns 1979b). Outside of the Soviet Union, other socialist states also manipulated ritual cycles and calendars for political, economic, and social goals. In the 1970s, for example, the Bulgarian government intensified its efforts in "cultural management" by introducing various kinds of "socialist" rituals, expanding from life-cycle rituals to national celebrations, "to replace the personality cult and (instill) new mechanisms to legitimize their power, to instill socialist values in the population, and to fight the influence of the Church" (Roth 1990:8). The importance of such engagements with the relationship between past, present, and future in individual and collective lives has to do with the centrality of time itself to Marxist-Leninist ideology (Kaneff 2004).

The impact of socialist calendars on mass perceptions of time, political opinion, or social values is clearly mixed. Roth, for examples, identifies four types of response to the Bulgarian regime's changes, none of which is wholly compliant with the intended effects. Instead, he finds partial rejection, adaptive acceptance, over-acceptance (in which a new ritual is used to accomplish "old" gains in status), and locally-specific meanings ascribed to public rituals (again towards private forms, primarily large-scale feasting) (1990:10). In the Soviet Union, as well, new holidays seem not to have created the extreme rupture with the past that was intended. The Soviet holiday cycle was intended not only to break the influence of religion in everyday life, but also to discipline peasants into urban, industrial workers by providing regular relaxation as a reward (Lane 1981). Yet within the conditions of a planned economy, the new holidays had the unexpected effect of duplicating the earlier agricultural-religious pattern of fast-feast (Petrone 2000:16 / 1994:79-80). Instead of smoothing time and work into a more uniform and continual process as happened in other industrial systems, the dynamics of economic production and

distribution under Soviet socialism intensified the disjuncture between “normal” times and celebratory periods.

The introduction of new holidays and rituals during the socialist period, however incompletely accepted, nevertheless contributed to the shape and form of everyday socialist life. As people participated in the life-cycle rituals, public holidays, and mass celebrations organized by the state, the possibilities for other activities were shaped and constrained accordingly, so that the rhythms of their lives became entangled with the state’s ideology and economic system. Katherine Verdery (1996:40), for example, describes the ways in which official temporal rhythms prevented Romanian citizens during the 1980s from engaging in hospitality and other forms of ritualized sociality that were not managed by the state. The ritual cycle mediated relations between the socialist state and its citizens in multiple ways. The revival of folk rituals in some areas, such as Western Ukraine, thus helped to break the state’s control over social life, introducing new models for political self-organization alongside the ritual itself (Kenney 2002).

But what has happened in the postsocialist period? In the early 1990s, new postsocialist governments throughout Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union engaged in a number of practices to remove the symbolic markers of the socialist regimes. Across the region, streets were renamed, monuments changed, history textbooks rewritten, and national holidays reintroduced or established (Watson 1994). The early years of postsocialism were so strongly marked by symbolic reordering that important political and cultural figures were even being moved and reburied in multiple locations (Verdery 1999). But what of the ritual cycle in its totality? Has it been a concern for the new regimes? And, if so, how are they using it? Do new rituals promote capitalism? Religion? Nationalism? Something else? In the following pages, I attempt a preliminary sketch and analysis of the contemporary ritual cycle in rural Moldova. The questions to be asked include how the postsocialist calendar differs from the socialist one, and what this tells us about the changing nature of power.

Definitions of ritual and related terms vary widely (see Bell 1997). In this case, I have followed the lead of Edward Muir, whose opinion is that it is most important to frame the concept of ritual “so that it is useful for analysis” (1997:6), rather than seeking an ultimate definition of the concept itself. Accordingly, I consider the ritual cycle to be composed of two elements – legal holidays determined by the state, and popularly observed feasting occasions. Feasting occasions further include major religious holidays, major Saints’ Days and popular name days, life-cycle events, death commemorations, and family holidays. The reasons for this selection will shortly become clear.

### **The Moldovan Case**

The Republic of Moldova became an independent state in 1991 with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Like other Soviet republics, the late 1980s were marked by the rise of a nationalist movement. In Moldova, this movement briefly represented the interests of multiple ethnic groups but soon developed into the Popular Front, which demanded recognition of the essential unity of ethnic Moldovans with ethnic Romanians, and the unification of Moldova with Romania. While ethnic Moldovans form the majority population (nearly two-thirds in 1989), the ethnic minorities nevertheless represent a numerically substantial and politically salient population. Thus, in the post-Soviet period, identity politics have been at the fore of state politics.

In the first years of independence, the new government pursued a variety of pro-Romanian policy changes. These changes, combined with elite politics, sparked violent conflict in the region of Transnistria, and among ethnic Gagauz in the south (Kauffman 1996). As a result, all subsequent governments have pursued “Moldovanist” orientations for the state’s national identity in varying degrees (King 2000), recognizing a kinship between ethnic Moldovans and Romanians, without insisting that the two peoples form a single nation, nor that the two countries should be united. In 2001, the reformed Communist Party gained control of the government for two terms, with their mandate ending in 2009. While the Popular Front’s engagement with political symbolism clearly stressed the Romanian identity of ethnic Moldovans and the Republic of Moldova, the engagement of subsequent governments with political symbolism has been less overtly recognized. Western analysts, for example, tend to see little substantive difference between the symbolic engagements of the Communist Party and its opposition, especially since 2005 when all political parties have promoted Europeanization and the eventual entry of Moldova into the European Union as a primary political goal (March 2004). Local scholars, however, report a much more complex relationship between the current Communist Party, Moldovanism, and the Soviet Union (Bîrlădeanu forthcoming, Cojocari 2007).

The complex relationship between contemporary political issues and the Soviet legacy is visible in the official ritual calendar. Since 26 December 1990, the list of official holidays and rest days in the Republic of Moldova has been modified five times.<sup>3</sup> In 1991, 1999, 2001, 2002, and 2009, new holidays have been added, and – occasionally – others have been removed. The result is a somewhat confusing mix of days, designated as one of three types: 1) national holidays and commemorative days; 2) traditional holidays; and 3) days of rest<sup>4</sup>. The list reflects the continuity of several Soviet-era holidays that were adopted by the general population, the reintroduction of religion into public life, and the commemoration of a few “heroes” of the recent national movement<sup>5</sup>. The impression gained from reading the list is hardly one of consistency or deliberation. The classification of holidays is chaotic, contradictory, and in many ways, nonsensical based on other local conceptions of how holidays ought to be divided.

**Figure 1:** Official Holidays and Rest Days in the Republic of Moldova (\* indicates holiday listed in more than one category)

	<b>Holiday</b>	<b>Date according to International Civic (Gregorian or “New”) calendar</b>	<b>Celebrated with Household Feast?</b>	<b>Also public holiday?</b>
<b>National holidays and commemorative days</b>				
	Mihai Eminescu Day (Romanian national poet and writer) (post-Soviet)	15 January	No	
	Commemoration of the Victims of Fascism	22 June	No	
	Sovereignty Day	23 June	No	
	Ștefan cel Mare Day (Moldovan Ruler) (post-Soviet)	2 July	No	

	Victims of Stalinism	6 July	No	
	Constitution Day	29 July	No	
	Independence Day (post-Soviet)*	27 August	No	Yes
	Our Language Day (post-Soviet)*	31 August	No	Yes
	National Wine Day (post-Soviet)	Second Sunday in October	No	
<b>Traditional holidays</b>				
	New Year's (1 January)*	1 January	Yes	Yes
	Mărțișor	1 March	Workplace	
	International Women's Day*	8 March	Yes	Yes
	International Worker's Day*	1 May	No	Yes
	Victory Day*	9 May	No / Some picnics	Yes
	International Children's Day	1 June	No	
<b>Days of Rest (Public Holidays)</b>				
	New Year's (1 January)	1 January	Yes	Yes
	Christmas (7, 8 January)	7, 8 January	Yes	Yes
	International Women's Day	8 March	Yes	Yes
	Easter	Changing	Yes	Yes
	Easter of the Blessed	1 week after Easter	Yes – in cemetery	Yes
	International Worker's Day	1 May	No	Yes
	Victory Day	9 May	No / Some picnics	Yes
	Independence Day	27 August	No	Yes
	Our Language Day	31 August	No	Yes
	Hram (locally specific)	each locale has its own	Yes	Yes
	Christmas	25 December	Some	Yes

National holidays and commemorative days are primarily new holidays, including two days devoted to Moldovan-Romanian national figures (Mihai Eminescu and Ștefan cel Mare), three days commemorating moments in the construction of post-Soviet statehood (Sovereignty Day, Constitution Day, and Independence Day), and one day which bridges nationalism and state construction (Our Language Day). Yet the category retains two Soviet-era holidays as well,

honoring both Victims of Fascism and Victims of Stalinism, and includes an apparently incongruous holiday – National Wine Day – introduced in 2002.

The list of “traditional holidays” is anything but. It includes the internationally celebrated date for New Year’s (1 January), International Women’s Day, International Worker’s Day, International Children’s Day, Victory Day, and Mărțișor. Three of these holidays reflect a commitment to internationalism, while Victory Day is an explicitly Soviet holiday. Even New Year’s can be considered a Soviet holdover, in that the official calendar places it on 1 January, rather than on the folk and religious date of 14 January. Only Mărțișor, falling on 1 March, coincides with folk calendrical rituals, but its celebration in Moldova is more clearly linked to Soviet-era efforts to build a Moldovan nation (Cojocari n.d.).

Several of the dates from the first two categories are also duplicated as “days of rest” on which public offices are closed. On New Year’s, International Women’s Day, International Worker’s Day, Victory Day, Independence Day, and Our Language Day, all state employees (including teachers) do not work. Additionally, five religious holidays - Christmas (both the traditional celebration on 7-8 January and 25 December), Easter (Orthodox), Easter of the Blessed (1 week later), and Hram (village patron Saints’ celebrations) - are listed as days of rest. The mix of occasions on which the state authorizes a full break from routine work, is thus also internally contradictory, training the population’s attention to both significant Soviet events and post-Soviet national ones; international and local; and state and church. In my fieldwork, I found that few of Moldova’s citizens know how their official holidays are categorized, but several of the dates – such as Victory Day, Christmas, and New Year’s – are regularly discussed as reflecting confusion in state priorities.

Indeed, as Bîrlădeanu (in press) has suggested, it appears that most of Moldova’s post-independence governments have adjusted the calendar without a deep conceptualization of what holidays are able to *do*.<sup>6</sup> The new calendar does reflect the political achievements of the late-Soviet national movement. For example, many of the new national holidays focus attention on the shared linguistic and cultural identity between Moldovans and Romanians, while the religious holidays now recognized as “days of rest” acknowledge the importance of Orthodox belief and practice in Moldovan life. The inclusion of holidays such as Easter, Easter of the Blessed, and Hram can be considered part of a broader religious revival, coinciding with renewed ethnic and national sentiment. In this way, the new holidays respond to demands for greater recognition of local identity, and – in granting it – secure legitimacy for the new state. Yet this aspect of national holidays is also confused by the continued celebration of Soviet holidays like Victory Day, and the days commemorating the Victims of Fascism and Stalinism.

The new holidays thus best represent the political tentativeness of Moldova’s postsocialist governments, as they have sought to distance themselves from Soviet rule, but also continue to rely on the Soviet system of holidays for legitimization among some segments of the population. Yet few of the new holidays, in concept or their celebration, seem intended to address the population beyond a narrowly defined political spectrum. For example, none of the new holidays seem intended to achieve the kind of effects commonly ascribed to state-established ritual calendars and cycles – e.g. regulating productivity, rewarding work, smoothing labor relations, or educating or entertaining the citizenry. Only National Wine Day, established by the Communist government (2001-2009) in its first year of power, looks beyond the immediate post-Soviet political context, as an attempt to “brand” Moldova and encourage international tourism and investment. Yet internal observers, comparing the variety of smaller holidays and events introduced by the Communist government, also see National Wine Day as



continuing Soviet efforts to mold public opinion and behavior. Bîrlădeanu (in press), for example, argues that National Wine Day, like the Cup of Moldova auto race, is modeled on Soviet mass celebrations, but that citizens have rejected these invitations to public drunkenness and generalized spectatorship. Indeed, my own research bears out Bîrlădeanu's claims that many citizens refuse to participate in National Wine Day in part to protest the government's evident lack of commitment to improving real life conditions in the countryside. In other words, the official list of holidays reflects the postsocialist state's general withdraw from planning, rather than a coherent vision of how holidays might be used as a tool of governance. Relatedly, while Moldova is officially transitioning to capitalism, the list of holidays indicates little concern for economic development. Official holidays, however, are only one part of the overall ritual cycle. In the following section, therefore, I will examine how official holidays combine with feasting events to contribute to a distinctive rhythm of work and rest with significant implications for understanding overall changes in the importance of the ritual cycle.

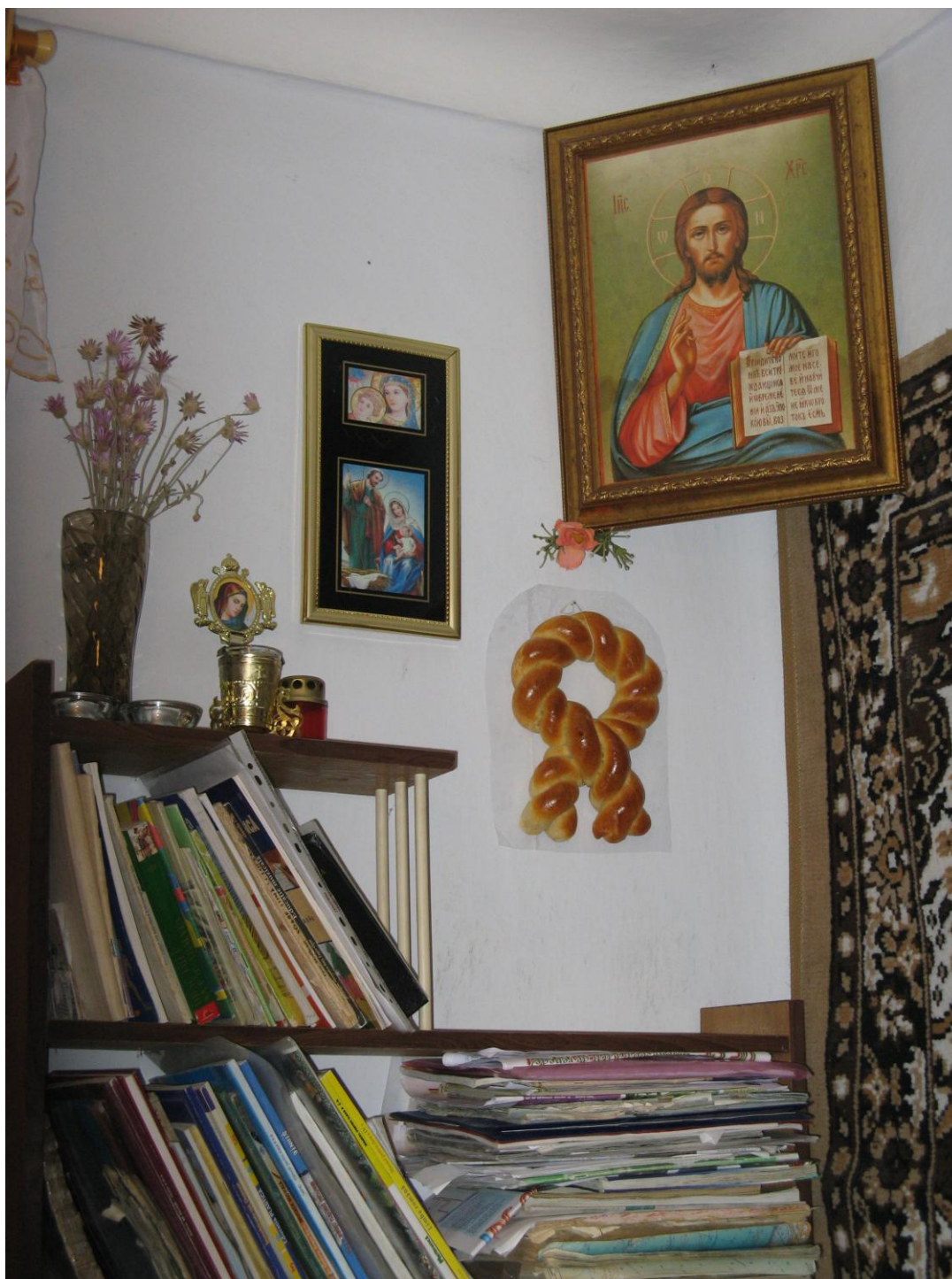


**Photo 1** - New Year's Eve continues to be celebrated as a major holiday on 1 January, very much as in the Soviet period.



**Photo 2** - In recent years, the national Christmas tree has been at the center of political contests between Chisinau's municipal government and the national government, and between the Communist Party and its opponents





**Photo 3** - Many traditions, like this crăciunelul, a bread that will be fed to cows at the end of the Christmas period, have been reinvigorated alongside the revival of religious holidays

## **Village Holidays and Feasts**

During 2009-2010, I conducted nine months of field research in the village of Răscăieți, near Moldova's southeastern border with Ukraine, and immediately on the border with the secessionist region of Transnistria. Răscăieți is a representative Moldovan village in several respects. From the geographical perspective, it is mid-distance from the capital city of Chișinău (ca. 113 km; 2-2.5 hrs drive), making it neither very far from, nor very close to, the country's political and economic center. It is also of medium size for a Moldovan village, with an official population size of about 2,500 people living in some 1,200 households. There are high rates of labor migration, particularly among the parents of school-aged children, of whom 54% have at least one parent working abroad.<sup>7</sup> The ethnic composition of the village is also overwhelmingly Moldovan, despite the prominence of Ukrainian surnames. There are also several Gypsy families who are now officially referred to as Roma although they do not speak Romani and identify themselves as "Moldovan" on census forms. Thus village demographics testify to the history of multi-ethnicity in the region while also reflecting a general tendency towards ethnic assimilation and homogenization within individual villages.

Răscăieți is also an old village – with continuous settlement from at least 1595 – but there are no buildings that are even 100 years old; nor are there other obvious markers of this long history, with the exception of a few artifacts housed in the village museum and among family possessions. Collective memory stretches only to the inter-war period, and really only to the events of the Second World War, when the village was on the frontline. In a well-remembered and commemorated battle, Soviet forces succeeded in crossing the Nistru River and taking control of a hill at the edge of the village. For several months, Soviet and German forces occupied the village and fought for its control, finally leading to the evacuation of the population as the German forces withdrew. Villagers report that upon their own return or that of their parents nothing remained: animals had been taken or slaughtered, houses burned, and even household goods (rugs, bedding) that had been buried in cellars for safekeeping were plundered. The period after the war is thus remembered as a time of starting households again "from zero." One woman, a kindergarten teacher, told me this was the reason that so many houses in the village still have thatched roofs; they were built in the immediate post-war period when people were forced to use the resources of the local marshland for building. There are three monuments in the village to commemorate aspects of these battles, and until "recently" (possibly as few as five years ago) veterans from the Soviet army who had fought in Răscăieți would come to the 9 May Victory Day commemorations with their families from other republics. This has declined in recent years as the veterans have died and new state borders between the former republics have made travel more difficult<sup>8</sup>. The war, however, remains an important pillar of village identity among even the youngest inhabitants.

Răscăieți's economy is dominated, like the whole country, by agriculture, and it has not fared well during the postsocialist transition. The village shares a mayor and administrative offices with an adjacent village, Răscăieți Noi, which was established on formerly unsettled land during the Soviet period with the rapid post-war population growth. Land holdings and economic data continue to be compiled collectively for the two localities, but other than the

mayor's office, they have separate institutions (church, school, kindergartens, culture house), and are felt to constitute two villages. During the Soviet period, the combined village boasted two collective farms, both centered in Răscăieți. One farm, with its fields, buildings, and brigades located along the central road(s) specialized in growing vegetables for seed stock, although it also produced grain, fruit, and grapes. Poultry, pigs, and cattle were raised in barns in Răscăieți Noi, as part of the operations of the first farm. The other farm, established somewhat later, specialized in grapes and bulk wine production.

The village might have been expected to fare better than it has under decollectivization and privatization because it is one of only four villages in a climatological microzone capable of producing the famous Purcari wines.<sup>9</sup> But the local wine factory has no bottling facilities, and Russia's recent bans on the importation of bulk Moldovan wine seriously crippled the factory's activities. Similarly, the political crisis between Moldova's central government and the secessionist region in Transnistria broke the chain of institutional relationships involved in vegetable seed production and verification. Local agricultural production and food processing has thus come to a virtual standstill in the past 15 years, with fewer than 100 people now employed by the village's two successor farms. The farms, moreover, no longer pursue the crops best-suited for the local soil and microclimate, but exclusively pursue grain production. Other employment options in the village are scarce, with only ten stores, three bars, and one internet and copy center, and a handful of entrepreneurial small farmers.

Between economic decline and labor migration, it would be reasonable to expect diminishing ritual activity. Indeed, people report a diminishment in the scale and liveliness of activities – a point to which I return in the conclusion – but the calendar itself hardly supports such a conclusion. Instead, the kinds of holidays observed by individual households appears – if anything – to be expanding, accommodating some of the holidays designated by national law, and also introducing a wider range of “religious” holidays into overt celebration.

As a component of overall fieldwork I conducted a small survey with 25 village households in February-March 2010. The questionnaire primarily included questions about household economic strategies, but also asked a question about the “celebrations, rituals, and events” that members of the household had participated in during the course of the preceding year<sup>10</sup>. The intent of the question was to gauge the cost of ritual life, as it then asked subsequent questions about whether gifts were given or received, whether the respondent considered this “expensive,” and who else attended the event. Although not intended as such, the question also had the effect of generating an image of the local ritual cycle and classification of “holidays.”

Respondents acknowledged few of the holidays included in the national law as among the “celebrations, rituals, or events” in which members of their household had participated in the past year. Observation also confirms that national holidays are rarely celebrated within the family. The survey question was instead interpreted as being about the feasts which a family sponsored or attended. The word my respondents used, *masă* (pl. *mese*), means table or meal, and could equally apply to any of a day's meals as to a large feast. Survey respondents, however, meant the term to refer to a limited number of feasts, outlined in the chart below, coinciding with several major religious holidays, major Saints' Days (especially those coinciding with popular namedays), family holidays, lifecycle rituals, and death commemorations.

**Figure 2:** Household Based Feasts

	<b>Holiday</b>	<b>Date according to International Civic (Gregorian or “New”) calendar</b>	<b>Celebrated with Household Feast?</b>	<b>Also public holiday?</b>
<b>Major Religious Holidays</b>				
	Christmas (old style)	7 January	Yes	Yes
	Easter	Changing	Yes	Yes
	Easter of the Blessed	Sunday or Monday after Easter, according to locality	Feast in the cemetery and at home	Yes
	Ispas (Ascension)	40 days after Easter	Yes	
	Duminica Mare / Rusaliile (Pentecost and Trinity Sunday)	50 days after Easter	Yes / Some picnics	
	Hram (locally specific)	each locale has its own; 21 November in Răscăieți	Yes	
<b>Major Saints Days</b>				
	Sf. Vasile	14 January	If nameday	
	Ion Botezatorul	19 January	If nameday	
	Sf. Ion	20 January	If nameday	
	Adormirea Maicii Domnului	28 August	If nameday	
	Sf. Andrei	13 December	If nameday	
	Sf. Gheorghe	6 May	If nameday	
<b>Family Holidays</b>				
	Birthdays		Yes	
	Namedays		Yes	
	Family Hram (St.’s Days)		Yes	
	Golden Wedding anniversaries (not all celebrated)		Yes	
<b>Life-Cycle Holidays</b>				
	Baptism	Often coincide	Yes	
	Cumătrie (baptismal party)		Yes	
	1 <sup>st</sup> birthday		Yes	
	Marriage registration	Often coincide	Yes	
	Cununie (betrothal)		Yes	
	Wedding (party)		Yes	
	Funeral		Yes	

<b>Death Commemorations</b>				
	Scheduled commemorations over 7 years		By families with deceased	
	Saturdays of the Dead		By families with deceased	

Of the holidays designated by national law, it is worth noting that only some of the public holidays are celebrated by household based feasts. Such feasts are held only on New Year's Eve, Christmas, Easter and Easter of the Blessed, Hram, and Women's Day. Each of these falls into the category of "days of rest," but households still do not feast on all public holidays. One family mentioned barbecuing outdoors on 9 May, but others did not, which means either that they are exceptional, that the holiday is in decline, or that most families forget to report it because it does not follow the more common schema of religious holidays suggested by Christmas, Easter, Hram, and even New Year's as a Soviet-era Christmas-substitute (see also Bîrlădeanu forthcoming). A further anomaly in the categorization of the national holiday list is that Soviet Army Day (23 February)-- though no longer in the official state calendar—is being resumed as a Men's Day among some segments of the population; this should not be dismissed as mere nostalgia or sympathy for the recently ruling Communist Party. In the village where I conducted research, Army Day activities were organized for high school boys by an outspoken "democrat" who otherwise opposes both the Communist Party and Russian influence on Moldova's political and cultural life. Rather, Army Day, as it is celebrated locally, commemorates the military service and resultant deaths of local men; not only does the village have strong memories of World War II, but it also lost a well-regarded young man during the Soviet war with Afghanistan<sup>11</sup>. Army Day celebrations involve food and drink, but exhibit a wide range, from men treating each other to drinks in local bars, to outdoor picnics and barbecues, to large meals prepared by the woman of a household to serve her husband's guests.

In urban areas, particularly the capital, many of the holidays outlined in national law are accompanied by public festivities – such as outdoor concerts, parades, and speeches. Thus urban families often participate in these holidays as a form of leisure, but do not organize corresponding private celebrations in their homes. For culture workers and many intellectuals, their part in the continual organization of these public festivities also intensifies their experience of living from "celebration to celebration." But similar events are organized more rarely in villages, meaning that the national calendar is less salient in the rural cycles of work and leisure. **"From celebration to celebration," or – "from the ship to the ball"**

While village households celebrate only six of the holidays recognized by national law with feasts, survey respondents identified many other feasting occasions in the course of a year. There are so many feasting occasions that respondents often tired of listing them for me. There are many differences between the kinds of events collectively identifiable as feasts. Feasting events in general range from festive meals held within the nuclear family (like those prepared on New Year's Eve or Christmas) to major events with upwards of 200 guests (like weddings). The



scale in the size of attendance is matched by a scale in expense, although even the smallest family events often cost upwards of 100 Euro. It was common, as well, for villagers (and their urban counterparts) to describe themselves as living “de la sărbători la sărbători” (“from celebration to celebration”), as a comment on the frequency with which they prepared and attended festive occasions. In an attempt to capture some of what that expression means, I describe the winter holiday season below.

On Saturday, 9 January, I took a short leave from fieldwork to attend a research group meeting in Macedonia. My host family was dismayed that I would be missing the second round of New Year’s Day celebrations, but gleefully announced that when I returned ten days later, I would be going directly “from the ship to the ball” – like a sailor on leave. Immediately upon my return, I would attend three birthday/nameday parties (only one of which I was told about before leaving), spend a day assisting in the preparations for a baptismal party, and then attend the same celebration the following evening.

We had already been celebrating what felt like a non-stop string of holidays through the month of December and the first week of January. On St. Andrei (14 December), which marked the beginning of the winter holiday season, the family sought out families to visit that were celebrating the nameday for one of their members. On 17 December, the family observed the six month mourning period for the wife’s mother’s death, scheduling it to coincide with her nameday (St. Varvara), rather than the actual calendrical date. While technically a somber occasion, it still involved substantial cooking and eating, with guests in attendance. St. Nicolae fell on 19 December, and again the family considered going to one of several families with a nameday celebration, but decided against it. Even then, the wife baked special breads to send to her son at university. On 25 December, many households prepared special foods in case they had visitors, since the day had been declared a holiday by the government. Though few families planned to celebrate this Christmas themselves, they were prepared for visitors who might be celebrating. The family I was staying with was no exception; in fact, they felt compelled to celebrate because of my presence, and invited several guests. On 26 December, I was invited to attend a 3-year death commemoration. Again, although somber, it also involved a feast, which had taken three women two days to prepare. 31 December and 1 January were celebrated as New Year’s Eve and New Year’s Day. When we attempted to “return to work” on 2 January, our plans were thwarted by a casual invitation by a neighbor, which we found impossible to refuse. On 4 January, we began three days of preparing food for Christmas on 7 January, which everyone expected to celebrate for a full three days. I left the village on the third day, but found myself celebrating St. Stefan’s Day as a family Hram (patron Saint’s day) with friends in the capital.

In short, from 14 December – 9 January, I had ten occasions to feast. Five of these occasions were calendrical holidays, likely to be celebrated by many if not most families in the village. Two were death commemorations, meaning that only a limited number of families in the village were participating. Yet all families observe such commemorations, and many were equally likely to do so during the winter holidays. One of these commemorations also fell on a Saint’s Day, so families with women named Varvara may have also had small celebrations. Families not celebrating 9 January as the third day of Christmas may well have celebrated it as a nameday or family hram. The one event “without occasion” was the invitation we received from our neighbors. But in fact, this last event did have an occasion – it was the day following a holiday, which meant that it fell within the traditional three days allotted to nearly all holidays for exchanging visits.

Although I had ten occasions to feast, and only technically observed eight, I actually feasted several more times. On the five calendrical occasions widely celebrated in the village, each household prepared and ate its own feast, received several shifts of guests, and then visited other households. My host family regularly visited two other households (their marital godparents, and their own marital godchildren)<sup>12</sup>. Because of the rounds of visitors and visiting, feasting usually continued on the second day of each holiday, and food remained for the third day (and sometimes subsequent days), so that visitors coming for non-celebratory purposes were still treated to a festive table in the days immediately following a holiday. In total, the calendar would predict some fifteen days out of twenty-five during the “winter holidays” as being used by all villagers for feasting during this period. Taking into account the additional one or two days of advance preparation needed for each, it is clear that the entire period is devoted primarily to feasting. The observance of family events in addition to the commonly observed calendrical holidays only intensifies this time.

Returning on 19 January, I arrived for Bobotează/John the Baptist Day. On this day, many households send an individual to morning church services, but household celebrations only occur when someone in the family is also celebrating a nameday. This, however, is one of the most popular namedays, and is thus widely celebrated with family feasts. Indeed, the husband in my host family celebrated it as both nameday and birthday. The 20 January, St. John’s Day, was similarly celebrated as a major nameday. It is also considered the last of the winter holidays, after which there are “officially” no further holidays until the spring.

Yet the spring comes early. Most people mention 23 February (Army Day) or 8 March as the next holidays to occur, but in fact are likely to observe other feasts in the intervening month. For example, the 21 January is traditionally celebrated as Midwives Day. Thus on the very day when women are supposed to resume household work, they may in fact take gifts of food and drink to the woman who delivered their children, spending the day joking and celebrating with other women. The holiday is no longer practiced in my fieldsite, but there was no shortage to continuing celebrations. In addition to birthday and nameday events, many families also use the lull in calendrical holidays to schedule lifecycle events such as baptisms and baptismal parties. On 22 January, for example, we spent the day preparing for a baptismal party to be held on the following day.

While December and January are expected to be passed as a series of celebrations and holidays, this rhythm often also marks a family’s life at other points of the year. This is true for three reasons. On the one hand, there are other holiday cycles, such as the cycle centered on Easter, which also generate multiple feasts. Interestingly, villagers who responded to my survey in February rarely mentioned the smaller feasts in the Easter cycle, but those who responded in late March, as Easter approached, often did. Clearly, the intense celebration of holidays does not “end” in late January, as I was often told, but continues throughout the year. Village Saints Day celebrations (Hram) form another cycle which generates multiple feasts. Although Hram celebrations occur throughout the year, most are clustered in the fall, before the Christmas fast begins. For many families, Hram celebrations in other villages provide the opportunity and motivation to visit family, friends, and colleagues. Yet since these visits tend to be reciprocal, the more visitors one receives during one’s own Hram, the more intense one’s own visiting/celebrating schedule is to other villages. Only the summer months (June-August) are not marked by widely shared holidays, but life cycle events, death commemorations, and the occasional village Hram continue to mark the calendars of individual households.



**Photo 4 and 5** - Family celebrations, such as baptismal parties (photo 4) and death commemorations (photo 5) are observed with food-laden tables

### **Life is Less Joyous...**

Many of my informants sense that there is something specific to the rhythms of Moldovan life, and this sense has become more pronounced as people who have worked abroad reflect on the differences in their life at home and abroad. For example, one woman described how people are permanently left with unfinished plans. “You decide you want to do something, and start to do it, and then something intervenes.” She retold the story of a friend who had worked abroad and returned home, determined to have “time for herself” as she had in Italy. Yet she found she could not “get things in order” at home in Moldova with the same techniques. “When you come back to Moldova, it is like walking into mud. You get stuck, and cannot move forward.” People told me repeatedly (and I observed), that they were constantly working from early in the morning until late at night, and that the constancy of feasts drove this intense schedule of household labor.

My fieldwork in the village of Răscăieți was part of a larger comparative project on economy and ritual in six postsocialist countries. One of our initial questions within the project was whether ritual activity has increased or decreased during the postsocialist period. Not surprisingly, this question does not have a simple answer. Public events, like many Soviet holidays, have largely disappeared from village life. At the same time, religious holidays have gained greater prominence. Major holidays like Easter that were observed with some secrecy during socialism are now openly observed. Many individuals are now also observing many more minor religious holidays and rituals than they previously did. My host mother, for example, no longer washes laundry or does other “work” on Sundays; she sometimes goes to church and gives *pomană* on Saturdays of the Dead; and she even attempted fasting for the first two weeks of Lent in 2010.

Other holidays have been both more and less pronounced in particular years. Holidays with a public dimension are particularly vulnerable to inconsistencies in organization and funding. For example, the celebration of village patron Saints’ days (Hram) has been generally increasing as part of religious revival since the early 1990s, particularly as churches have been newly built or reopened. Villagers in Răscăieți remember the mid-1990s as a highpoint in their own Hram celebrations – when outdoor concerts and dances were organized and drew large crowds. In recent years, however, there has been declining interest and energy in Hram celebrations. This was particularly noticeable in 2010, when the mayor put little effort into organizing public activities because her energies were occupied with problems related to the installation of gas mains along the village’s central streets, and no other individual or group (such as the staff at the Culture House) took the planning initiative. As it happened, Hram fell during the highpoint of the 2009 flu pandemic, and all public activities except the church service were cancelled by recommendation of the county government. Rumors spread that the police would block entrance roads to the village (it had the highest number of flu cases in the county), and many expected guests did not arrive from other cities and villages. The example of Hram celebrations points not only to the importance of uncontrollable idiosyncrasies from year to year (such as weather or flu scares), but also the central role played by festivity organizers in garnering interest and enthusiasm for particular holidays. This example reveals the continuing legacy of hierarchical and politicized control of cultural activity from the Soviet era as well: in most villages, culture workers have primary responsibility for organizing public celebrations, such as dances and concerts, but they often do not undertake these responsibilities without the

mayor's direction. Moreover, both culture workers and political leaders at the county level can require, encourage, or deter the organization of public events in villages.

On the whole, formal observances of holidays, traditions, and religious rituals within households are probably on the increase. Yet people report a loss of excitement, interest, energy, and enthusiasm over the recent and more distant pasts. When I questioned this, informants could identify no clear patterns in the changing holiday cycle. Most were quick to assess the holidays as decreasing, but this perspective that holidays were more special, joyful, or sincere "before" was adopted equally by respondents in their early twenties and those in their mid-80s, as well as everyone in between. Reported assessments of changes in the ritual cycle, are therefore almost certainly overdetermined by a shared style of narrating history as decline. As Zerubavel notes, narratives of decline are "mental historical outlooks," which cannot be equated with "actual historical trends" (2003:16). When pressed to compare the celebration of particular holidays across years, I was also offered evidence that "every year is different." Indeed, this perspective also reflects villagers' assessment of the recent past as a period of general impermanence, instability, and constant change.

### **Postsocialism and the Flattening of Time**

A more complex discussion of measuring change, and especially of analyzing the structure of informant memories of past ritual activity, is certainly well worth pursuing. In the immediate context of documenting the postsocialist ritual cycle in rural Moldova, however, a few initial conclusions can be made. The most important of these is to note that while there appears to be an overall proliferation of rituals and feasts, people are experiencing a flattening of the ritual cycle. It is clear that during the postsocialist period, the celebration of public holidays in villages has certainly decreased, while the celebration of major and minor religious holidays within the household has definitely increased. In other words, public celebration has decreased, while private feasting has increased. This general change is also noted by informants who point out that holidays are increasingly becoming occasions for feasting that are not accompanied by additional ritual activities. This is true in the case of the village Hram, where interest in public dancing has dropped off. It is also especially true for the ritually-dense winter holiday period, where a number of subsidiary activities associated with the holidays are no longer being practiced. For example, the night before St. Andrei's Day was previously accompanied by a number of divination rituals practiced by girls to determine the qualities of their future husbands. While women in their forties and older have vivid memories of at least one episode of divination from their girlhood, teenage girls today and their parents report that such divination does not take place. Similar examples are abundant.

The result is a flattening of the ritual cycle. Rituals become, in this case, primarily feasts, and holidays have few dimensions other than time off from work spent in cooking and eating. In this context, the experience of going "from celebration to celebration," is only partly a joyful one. It also entails frustrations, and a sense of not being able to bring work plans, whether at home or in the fields, to completion. In the light of previous research on socialist holidays, for example Katherine Verdery's discussion of the *etatization* of time through celebrations as well as work and production schedules, this experience of frustration and lack of control in the postsocialist setting appears as something of a paradox. Why have people not used free time in "their own interest"? Why does the observance of rituals continue to be felt as something not in individuals' control in the postsocialist period? In the current period, it is not even possible to see the



celebration of holidays as something determined by the state, as the official calendar is no longer connected to any clear policy to encourage social rhythms in a particular direction. The answer of course is complex, and points to the multiple forms which individual and collective self-interest can take.

The combined extension and flattening of the ritual cycle, with its series of feasts which households are constantly preparing and consuming, is the result of a complex combination of institutions influencing local rhythms. The decline in public festivals, for example, is most closely linked to the withdrawal of the post-Soviet state from the instrumental use of festivities to control social rhythms and ideology. Not only has the village government and culture house ceased to plan many public festivals, but withdrawing from public activities has been a pragmatic response as people themselves reject the intrusion of the state into their lives. In not organizing public festivals through informal means, people do in fact use free time to other, self-interested purposes. The increase in family feasting, however, should be differently explained. Family feasting in Moldova (excluding major events like weddings), has little connection to direct economic incentives or discouragements. The reciprocal nature of feasting reaffirms and strengthens a core set of relations on which people rely for many kinds of support, but households vary in the degree to which they rely on close relatives, godparents, or godchildren for securing their material needs, and most seek to minimize their dependence, even as they increase visitation. In this case, feasting may be best understood as promoting social relationships for their own sake. Labor migration affects the attendance of individuals at ritual events, and also supplies cash for purchasing many food items, but also bears little direct influence on the extension or flattening of the ritual cycle. Rather, the most direct influence on the ritual cycle appears to be the reinvigoration of many religious holidays as family feasts.

The reinvigoration of family feasting is best understood as part of a lived nationalism and religious revival as people seek to reclaim time as an expression of their individual and collective identities. The holidays are known “from tradition,” and have been actively reinstated in the ritual cycles of many households as an effort to recapture the past, and specifically, the sense of moral order ascribed to the past. In reclaiming time for identity, however, people have also lost the ability to put time to other purposes such as completing other necessary tasks for household provisioning, physical rest, or leisure activity. Feasting punctuates work, but it not does not necessarily bring rest. Awareness of this situation produces tension, especially among women who bear responsibility for most of the cooking and cleaning, yet everyone feels compelled to observe the feasts, largely for the dual purposes of avoiding social censure and reaffirming social relationships through reciprocal visits. Paradoxically, in the case of Moldova, changes in the ritual cycle during postsocialism suggest a “return” to a pre-capitalist temporal order, where the religious and agricultural cycles dominate alterations between work and rest.

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<sup>1</sup> Field research was conducted in the context of a comparative project on “Economy and Ritual” in postsocialist Eurasia, at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, Germany. A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the 6<sup>th</sup> Biannual Conference of the International Association for Southeast European Anthropology (InASEA) held in Regensburg, Germany 28 April – 1 May, 2011. Special thanks are due to Corina Rezneac and Mariana Harjevschi for assistance in clarifying the legal status of holidays in Moldova, as well as to Nevena Dimova and Vesna Vučinić-Nešković for their comments on the original draft. All interpretations and opinions, however, remain my own.

<sup>2</sup> Creed (2002:57) adds that the absence of ritual analysis for the postsocialist period is a particularly “curious lacuna” because several leading scholars had worked on the topic prior to the collapse of socialism, and because ritual has remained a topic of interest for prominent anthropologists of Western Europe for several decades.

<sup>3</sup> Hotărîrea Parlamentului Republicii Moldova cu privire la zilele de sărbătoare și la zilele de odihnă (Parliamentary Decision of the Republic of Moldova concerning celebratory days and rest days). Document in author’s possession, copy provided by the Public Law Library in Chișinău (Biblioteca Publică de Drept).

<sup>4</sup> The categories, in the original Romanian, are 1) sărbători naționale și zile comemorative, 2) sărbători tradiționale, and 3) zile de odihnă.

<sup>5</sup> Days devoted to particular categories of workers are not included in this list, but several continue to be celebrated by workers themselves. Teacher’s Day, for example, is still widely celebrated in schools. I do not include these days in my discussion because they are institutionally restricted, and not accompanied by feasting within most households.

<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, it is not currently possible to access transcripts of the parliamentary sessions in which the law on holidays was discussed. A major fire in Moldova’s parliament building on 7 April 2009, destroyed many of the records held in the parliamentary archives. Restoration is ongoing, but as of November 2010, when my research assistant, Corina Rezneac, obtained permission to the archives, all copies of the minutes related to the holiday law appear to have been among the lost records.

<sup>7</sup> In 2008, the local school conducted its own census, revealing that 30% of students have both parents working abroad, and 54% of students have at least one parent working abroad. The census was considered necessary because official statistics are based on registered residents of the village. When migrants do not officially un-register themselves as residents in the village they continue to be counted, even when they are not “at home” for long periods. While many migrants, particularly men, are only absent from the village for part of the year, even migrants who work abroad for several years do not usually renounce their village residency.

<sup>8</sup> These are the causes that the director of the village museum, who organized the event, gave for the decline, but I think it is almost certainly more complex. War memorials and commemoration have been studied by two local anthropologists, Ludmila Cojocari and Gabriela Popa. Cojocari (2007), for example, demonstrates that recent large-scale war commemorations have depended on official support, organization, and financing by the state. In a case-study of several villages, including the nearby village of Carahasani, Popa (2009) also finds that the renewal of war memorials and commemorations has largely been dependent on the initiative of one or a few individuals, if not organized through official channels. Both also find a pattern in which war commemorations have been moving from memorials into cemeteries during recent years, and in which the dead of all armies (not just Soviet forces) are now likely to be remembered despite the continuity of official state rhetoric which neglects the reality that Moldova’s men also fought in

the Romanian forces. Thus, I suspect that there are other reasons that the style of commemoration has changed in Răscăieți, including – at the very least – the museum director's changing level of commitment and activity, changing priorities of the local administration, and new options for commemorating the war dead.

<sup>9</sup> The Purcari wines are blends, marked by precise sugar content and trace minerals of grapes grown on the hill slopes of these villages, which are in turn related to particular combinations of soil and sunlight. The more famous black wine (Negru de Purcari), sometimes ordered by the British royal family, combines Cabernet-Sauvignon, Rara Neagră, and Saperavi grapes. The red (Roșu de Purcari) contains Cabernet-Sauvignon, Merlot, and Malbec grapes. During the Soviet period, a third blend, Purple Purcari, was also produced in each of the four villages, but now is produced by none of them.

<sup>10</sup> The questionnaire I used was developed by the members of the Economy and Ritual group at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology to generate a limited set of comparative data on six field sites. Similar data on ritual cycles and the cost of ritual activity thus exist for communities in Romania, Hungary, Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Kyrgyzstan.

<sup>11</sup> The importance of Army Day is almost certainly like that of Victory Day, which – aside from official commemorations organized by the national government – has been absorbed into the celebration of Easter and familial cycles of death commemoration (Cojocari 2007). Many war monuments have similarly been absorbed into the fabric of local village memory and commemoration, quite apart from their official Soviet meanings (Popa 2009).

<sup>12</sup> There are two types of godparents in the Republic of Moldova – those who witness and sponsor a wedding (*nași de cununie*), and those who baptize a child (*nași de botez*). The godchildren in both cases are referred to as *fin* (m.), *fină* (f.), or *fini* (pl.).

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