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HISTORY, IDEOLOGICAL MYTHOLOGY AND NATION-BUILDING IN THE POST-SOVIET REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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> "Indeed, nation-ness is the most universally
> legitimate value in the political life of our time."
>
> (Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities*)

Abstract

Our study aims to reveal the main patterns of the *historical mythology* in the discourse of the authority that is involved in the processes of ideological nation-building in the Republic of Moldova. In this regard, methods of deconstruction and typologisation of the main contents of the patterns were applied, the analysis of the motives and tasks of the authors, and, finally, the functions of the mythological narrative about the past were examined. The objects of study are the *historical narratives* from the period of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, and, respectively, the Republic of Moldova.

Introduction

With the concept of "symbolical ethnicity", Anthony D. Smith defines ethnos as "a group of people with a name, sharing the same myths about ancestors, having a common history and culture, being associated with a specific territory, of which the feeling of solidarity is characteristic." In this case, he uses the notion of "complex of myths and symbols", which includes the so-called "myth motor" – the constituent myth of the community, which refers to the special place of ethnos in history, its special religious and civilizational mission. According to Smith, the historical myth consists of several elements, such as narration about the nation's origin, ancestors and genealogy, migrations, the Golden Age, and the decline and rebirth of a nation.

Based on the fact, that a contemporary ethnos traces its roots back to the pre-capitalist epoch, Smith considers historical myths as part of the "living tradition" of the nation, and cultural heritage, as relatively independent from the political state of affairs.

Contrary to Smith, who has some inclinations towards primordialism, the representatives of the constructivist school (Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, Eric J. Hobsbawm and others), insist on the relatively recent origin of the contemporary na-

tions and examine all the components of ethnicity, including the national symbols, traditions and historical myths, as the production of the industrial society and the absolutist state. The constructivists follow that the principle of Gellner that "nationalism produces nations, not vice-versa". In this context, cultural heritage appears as a result of the conscious "modeling" of the national culture, the "invention of traditions" (Eric J. Hobsbawm), and the historical myths, together with the official narratives, are examined as political and ideological constructions, designed to manipulate the social conscience.

A crucial moment in the construction and modification of national communities is considered to be the struggle for the official interpretation of history: so, the gaining of independence and the following process of "nation-building" are accompanied by the appearance of new ethnic and historical myths that confirm the antiquity of the existence of the ethnoses, the originality and the global importance of their contribution to the civilization's development. Thus, representing the social and political construction, the historical myth itself is a means of building the social reality: the reappraisal of the political situation by the political leaders, the projects promotion for the future, and mobilization of their followers.

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"The parade of the sovereignties" on the territory of the Soviet Union, which broke up in 1991, gave birth to at least fifteen new states, which have assimilated the political heritage of the dead empire in different ways. Besides prospects of collective liberty, the Republic of Moldova, at the dawn of its independence, has inherited from the USSR a number of problems and contradictions. The new state, which determined its *national categories* (Benedict Anderson), has faced the territorial and social heritage of the former empire, once created according to the theory of a *multinational communist state*. Stalin's bolshevist program of the modernization of the empire implemented in the 1920s-1940s intended to transform the multinational empire into a state of nations. Every republic got a Communist party and a national government, and the titular nations of the republic received certain rights. The identification of the population, with the ethnic markers imposed by the Party and its grouping according to national categories, has guaranteed the formal legitimacy of the administrative divisions and the delineations of the newly-made cultural borders[1]. However, the ideological orientations for the

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1. Soviet "localization policy" has very soon revealed the source of the faction between the central authorities and the local party leaders. There have appeared accusations of treachery, and, as a result, there has been a purge of the Party and repressions among the ethnical minorities, which began with the deportations of the Cossacks, Koreans, Kurds, Finns, Poles and Germans from the strategically important near-boundary regions in the 1933 – 1936 years. The suspicions which the Bolsheviks had at this stage have

world revolution and the territorial expansion marked the configurations of the national project. In this sense, in 1924, on the territory of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was created, which, according to the project initiators, could "play the same role as the political and propagandist factor, as the Byelorussian Republic played for Poland, and the Karelian Republic for Finland. It would serve as an object for attracting the attention and sympathy of the Bessarabian population and would provide a better occasion to pretend about the reunion with the Zadniestrovie (Cross-Dniester) (i.e. Bessarabia)" (Скворцова 2001, p. 83-84).

The disruption of Soviet and Romanian negotiations incited the transfer of the Moldovan problem to the ideological level. The initiative group claimed: "There are not less than 500-800,000 Moldovans living on the left bank of the Dniester River, in the ex-Herson and Kamenets-Podolsk provinces, who lead their own specific national way of life and speak the Romanian dialect, Moldovan language; according to the Romanians' claims, there are up to two million of these Moldovans". Some other facts were mentioned in the statement from the Central Administrative and Territorial Commission on the "geographic demarcation of districts, populated by representatives of the Moldovan nationality". This statement was formulated by the First Deputy Home Affairs People's Commissar of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, Cherlyunchakevich, who opposed the idea of creating the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic on the territory of the Ukrainian SSR. The total number of Moldovans living in Ukraine, as quoted by the censuses of the population from 1897 and 1920, is estimated at 177,700. According to the data of the population census from 1920, there were about 138,800 Moldovans living in the Odessa province; 18,500 in the Nikolaev province; 10,400 in the Donetsk province. A certain portion of the population lived in the Podolsk province. As shown in the statement, there were 114,800 (14,2%) Moldovans; 419,600 (69,2%) Ukrainians; and 72,100 (10,3%) Russians, living in the Transnistrian districts. Also, the statement included certain information referring to the evidence of data falsification of the Transnistrian nationalities' to overstate the number of Moldovans and their share in the total structure of

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been strengthened during the Second World War, when some nations have been accused of cooperation with the occupants. The deportation of populations and the state-controlled migration of the Russians to the new borders of the post-WWII empire had to assure the power of the center on the outlying districts (Баберовски, 2006).

the population, which was initiated by the Committee responsible for collecting the necessary ethnical and historical materials, including the soldiers and commanders of the Second Cavalry of G. I. Kotovski (Скворцова 2001, p. 88).

Despite this, the negative final statement was made at the meeting of the Ukrainian Constitutional Committee on 13 April 1924, regarding the "setting up of the Moldovan Republic or region, province, county or district". Taking into account the increased opposition to this project in the higher spheres of power, on 29 July 1924, at the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik), it was decided "to consider it necessary, primarily from political motives, to take into account the need for separating the Moldovan population into a special autonomous republic, as a part of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic".

In Odessa the Organizational Commission was created for decision-making and coordination of all the problems related to the creation of the republic. Its leader, the chief of the Department for foreign affairs of the Central Committee of the Ukrainian Communist Party, A. L. Grinstein, published, in August 1924, in the newspaper "Odessa News", one of the first articles to initiate the theory of two peoples and two languages – Romanian and Moldovan, based on the example of the ethnic and linguistic development of Russians and Ukrainians (Negru 2003, p. 11). Regarding the forms and methods of the activity of the organizational commission, on 20 August 1924, the decision of the province committee from Odessa eloquently waxes: "not to disseminate information on the Organizational Commission activity, as this work is strictly secret and officially doesn't exist …the activity of the Organizational Commission is of an internal character and … the demands must come from the lower-level rural inhabitants" (Скворцова 2001, p.91).

Imitation of the general democratic procedures and invention of the ethnic basis for the creation of the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was a typical example of the Bolshevist revolutionary creative work. Later, on the "forefront of national-cultural building", the leaders were divided in groups defending different points of view about the development of the Moldovan language and writing. With alternating success, the initiative passed from one party to the other. Stalin's repressions equally concerned the adherents of the Romanization and Cyrillization of Moldovan writing. Only in May 1938, did the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee of the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, with the decision "Concerning the transfer of the Moldovan

writing from the Latin print to the Russian print", finally legalize the use of Cyrillic characters for Moldovan writing.

The Molotov-Ribbentrop pact from 23 August 1939 served as a basis for the re-annexation of Bessarabia in June 1940, following the ultimatum of the Soviet government, which referred to "the secular unity of Bessarabia, populated mainly by Ukrainians, with the Ukrainian Soviet Republic" and "the fact of the forcible seizure of Bessarabia" from the Soviet Union[2]. On 2 August 1940, the Seventh Session of the Supreme Council of the USSR passed the law about the creation of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. About 300,000 people left the territory for fear of repression. Simultaneously, the backflow of the emigration began, and as a result, more than 150,000 people passed from Romania to the territories occupied by the Soviet Union. In addition, about 80,000 ethnic Germans from Bessarabia and 30,000 from Northern Bukovina were evacuated, with the support of the German authorities.

The repressive system developed by the Soviet Union created the possibility to establish Stalin's regime within a very short period, purging the remaining Bassarabian intelligentsia. The majority were those who studied in the Romanian schools, so they were "exposed to a deep influence of the bourgeois ideology, and, in most cases, were the Romanian bourgeois and in the nationalist parties". This group was excluded from the society, purged and deported. The second group consisted of intellectuals, educated in the Old Russian schools. They "positively accepted the Soviet system and abided by it till the end". The third group consisted of intellectuals, who, within the period of 1940–1941, "have accepted the Soviet system, but were repressed by the Romanians in the period of the Romanian-German occupation". They were repatriated, but "it is necessary to pursue a safe policy and nominate only the most active and devoted to the Soviet power". A separate group wer the "Moldovan intellectuals", assigned by the Soviet power to hold responsible positions: agronomists, doctors, directors of schools, and teachers. The most dangerous group for the Soviet power was the intelligentsia that received their education in Romania, and the intelligentsia that was repatriated (Scurtu 2001, p. 259).

The new national project of the Soviet power in the Moldavian SSR, although it stated as its basic principle the condemnation of the "bourgeois nationalism" and the triumph of the "proletarian" one, inherited a series of contextual features from the old empire. The search for Slavonic origins in a historical and ethnical measurement, the extrusion of the boundary

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[2] *The telegram of the people's commissar of foreign affairs of the USSR V.M.Molotov to the plepotentiary of the USSR in the Kingdom of Rumania A.I.Lavrentiev,* June, 27th, 1940, the Archives of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, F.059. L.1. P.319. F.2194. LCh.89-90.

feature of the Pruto-Dniestrian space, in which elements of the "Slavonic and non-Slavonic" world had to intersect, become mythological constants of the new national project. The treatises on the history of the MSSR began to actively "establish" the national past in response to the "appeal of the Party and the government". The best time for the beginning of the ethnogeny of the Moldavians were the vague (in terms of the written sources) Middle Ages that presented enough tactical gaps for the new ideological theory based on hackneyed mythological schemes.[3] We will mention just a few of the incarnated archetypes: ... at the beginning, there wasn't anything: "After the devastating invasion of the Huns in the last third of the fourth century the space between the rivers Dniester and Prut became almost entirely depopulated. There have been rare archeological findings relating in this territory related to the fifth century" (Царанов 1982, p. 32). Furthermore, according to the logic of the development of the cosmogonical scenario, the first subject who personified the founders-creators of the new paradigm appeared - "At the end of the fifth and beginning of the sixth centuries in the history of the lands between Dniester and the Carpathians, a new stage related to the mass migration of the Slavonians to South-eastern Europe began. They moved from Central and Eastern Europe, and, by the end of the sixth and beginning of the seventh centuries, by breaking the system of the defensive installations at the Northern border of the Byzantine Empire – the Danube, they headed for the South, populating all the territory of the Balkan Peninsula. In the regions between Dniester and Carpathians, the Slaves moved from the North to the South down the valleys of Siret, Prut and Dniester" (Царанов 1982, p. 32). This was followed by the fundamental action of overcoming/settling the chaos/space. "Unlike nomadic tribes who moved fast, the Slavonians moved slower because of their agricultural and sedentary nature. As a result, simultaneously with settlement, there was a process of land developing. During the sixth and seventh centuries, the Slaves settled a considerable part of the territory of the lands between Dniester and the Carpathians" (Царанов 1982, p. 32). The name of the founder had to give sense and legitimacy to the sources and the following events. It also had to give a personalization of the space in the surrounding world: "Gradually, the single whole body of the Slavs, who occupied the lands in Central and Eastern Europe, divided into Eastern and Western Slaves. In the Old Russian chronicle "Повесть временных лет" (Narration of the temporal years), the settlement of the Eastern Slavonic tribes in Eastern Europe is written about. The tribes of the Tivertsy and Ulitchs were living in the extreme South-western territory of this settlement. [...] On the territory of the Moldavian

SSR about 100 Eastern-Slavonic monuments, dating from the ninth to twelfth centuries, have been found" (Царанов 1982, p. 33). By the middle of the tenth century the Kievan Rus' unified the Eastern-Slavonic tribes, including "the last arriving Tivertsy and Ulitchs", "becoming a component part of the culture of the Eastern-Slavonic world". Gradually, under ideological pressure, a transfer from the territory between Prut and Dniester, from the outskirts of the Roman world into the outskirts of the Slavonic one, occurs in the historical narrative. Thus, as a consequence of the movement of the Slaves in two streams, avoiding the Carpathian mountains, and partially settling in the emptied lands between Dniester and the Carpathians, in the west and in the south of the Carpathians, where the Romanized population was (the second participant to the creative act), and also as a result of " the long and intimate contact of the Romanized population and the Slavs, at the end of the ninth century, a new ethno cultural community was formed - the Vlachs. However, the brightest page of the innovations of this narrative is the episode of the Moldavian ethno-genesis. "The Vlach population, which settled on the eastern territory of the Carpathians during the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, formed the basis of the Moldavian population. By moving to the new and sparsely populated lands, the Vlachs found themselves in natural and political conditions, which were different to the places populated by the other branches of the Vlachs in the lands between the Carpathians and the Danube. These new conditions and the contact with the eastern Slavs led to the origin and the development of certain ethnic features differed from the rest of the Vlachs" (Царанов 1982, p. 34).

The reduction, in this discourse, of the complex ethnic processes to the ideological conjunctures led the space between Prut and Dniester to the role of a historical boundary between the Slavonic and the Roman worlds, and, effectively, reflected a certain part of the representations about the boundaries and the vector of the territorial expansion of the empire. Certainly, the Moldovans, "derived" from the double slavization of the Eastern Roman population - according to Stalin's theory of nations, by the end of the nineteenth century, had to be ready for the formation of the "Moldavian bourgeois nation" (Царанов 1982, p. 217 – 220)[4], and by 1940, had to be ready for the creation of the *Moldovan statehood* – «молдавская государственность» (Лазарев 1995). As a matter of fact, at that time, the iden-

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[4] According to this theory, it was considered, that the basic ethnical territory, in the limits of which the Moldavian bourgeois nation was formed, included the Bessarabian province, and also the territories of the left-bank of the Podniestrovie, which included a part of the provinces of Podolsk and Kherson. At the end of the XIXth – the At the At the beginning of the twentieth centuries on the given territory, the Moldavian bourgeois nation was formed, which has been in the picture in the national self-consciousness of the Moldavian people…

tity of the Bessarabians did not include the conception of statehood. However, along with the formation of the Moldovan SSR, the identity of this territory received a more pronounced character. Although the Soviet proto-statehood did not allow real rights to be exercised, certain symbols, such as the State opera, the flag and the coat of arms, preserved the image of the Moldovan Republic as being part of the USSR in the political consciousness (Fruntaşu 2002, p.218).

Myths and ideological conceptions of Soviet historiography were already formulated by the beginning of 1950s with the following postulates:

-   the *myth of a special mission* for the Soviet Union (the Russian empire) and as its derivatives, myths of "peaceful annexation", liberation, post-war restoration and modernization of new peripheries, in particular, in South-Eastern Europe;

-   the ideological conception of Soviet patriotism, which initiated the myths of Soviet people's friendship supported purely by friendly, centuries-old relations and collaboration with the "elder brothers"- the Russian people;

-   the myth that Moldovan people are not Romanian ethnicity and, consequently, making Stalin's ideological canons acceptable, inventing the stages of the creation of "the Moldovan bourgeois nation," "the Moldovan socialist nation" (Грекул 1955, Лазарев 1978, Мохов 1978) and the theory of the *Moldovan statehood* (Афтенюк 1971).

Historians, under the direct control of "competent authorities ", in search of the convenient scientific theory of the establishment of the Moldovan nation considered the vague Middle Ages or the period of the nineteenth century suitable for this. According to the most successful display of Marx's and Lenin's terminology applied to the historical narration about Bessarabia, common Romanian and Moldovan ancestors – *vlahi, volohi*, at an earlier than ethnogeny stage divided into two branches: one branch co-operated with the southern Slavs and the other- with the eastern Slavonians. In the post 1944 Moldovan national narration, in accordance with the official historic Soviet sources, Romania played the role of *the Other* – the foreign enemy and the conqueror. This dissent was consolidated in practice by the Soviet historiography, which referred to Romanian sources after 1812 as "foreign" sources, even when the question referred to the "non-defense period" when Bessarabia belonged to the developing Romanian state. The situation began to change in the 1990s as a result of the collapse of the communist system and the activation of the discussion regarding the national and civilizational affiliation of the population of the former Soviet

republic. The reconstruction of the image of the national past at a mass level actively occurred not only under the influence of political processes, but also under the influence of social practice.

In the second half of the 1980s, after the collapse of the USSR, the "dividing" function of history faced the necessary and inevitable task of the foundation ("restoration") of the new state's formations and, accordingly, of strengthening the sovereignty of the "new" authority. In the majority of the post-Soviet states, where the project of the creation of the nation was put into action, history was given the role of "the catalyst of the processes of the ethnic Renaissance" and the theoretical base for ideas of statehood. Apparently, the scale of the political projects directly influenced the scale of references to mythological components of mobilizing narrations.

In the Republic of Moldova, a new political class dissatisfied with the professional historians' contribution to the formation of the Moldovan nation, initiated a new development in a literary-political activity (Терешкович 2005). Most of the authors turned to the image of the territory of the Republic of Moldova as a sacral place of development for the Moldavian nation, in spite of the fact that the historical centers of medieval Moldova remained beyond the borders of the republic. However, the main resistance to the mythology lies in the fact that the precise identity of this area begins in 1812 - not from the moment they gained their rights and sovereignty but, on the contrary, from the moment that they lost them. The answer is as simple as can be: "Here is our Moldova" (Vasile Stati 2002, p.15; Stepaniuc 2006, p.19), turning the discussion from a historical to a literary-ideological level, beyond the dilemmas and conventions.

"The Moldovan ethnos, the notion that *Moldovans* are convincing evidence that the general origin – Roman, Slavic or German - did not prevent people from identifying themselves differently on the basis of language and ethnic criteria, leading them to form and approve separate independent state structures. And if they do not show the importance of territorial claims in the view of their general origin, they live and prosper in a friendly neighborhood."

(Stepaniuc 2006, p.22) [5]

The former president of Moldova, P. K. Lucinschi, liked to begin reflections about the identity of Moldovans and Moldovan statehood with the typological model of the sacral center: "Moldova has always been, as a well-known folk ballad says, a 'corner

of paradise', a country with the most fertile soil. At different times foreign research has always mentioned that the local soil surpasses famous fields in Italy, Holland, and Belgium in the ability to provide rich harvests, and that it is as generous as the Nile's valley. Only sixteen other countries have such fertile soil. However, Moldova takes first place among them because it has the highest percentage of chernozem (black earth). The climate of Moldova is temperate-continental, the summers are really warm, autumn is long and gentle, and winter is not very cold. Although there have been many exceptions during the last century, these advantages of our native land have remained thus far" (Лучинский 2006, p. 6.).

The myth of the *Malicious Conspiracy* is actively supported by zealous advocates of "the Moldavian state system and language" that saw a threat in the perspective of the union of the Republic of Moldova and Romania. It was their efforts that provoked the coolness of the diplomatic relations with this country. Thus, one can state with confidence that the use of the conflict between different political forces led to serious consequences in the Republic of Moldova. They vividly show the danger of using archetype constructions for the political struggle.

Political corruption, material hardships and a moral vacuum became the ingredients that encouraged eschatological expectations. That is why today the myth of the *Golden Age* (or "nostalgia for the lost paradise") has as one of its main strategies, the escape of the mass consciousness from reality into the happy past or future. The myth of the *Golden Age* in Moldova reveals itself in three forms of nostalgia simultaneously: 1) nostalgia for communism when Moldova was "the garden" of the USSR; 2) nostalgia for the Great Medieval Moldova; 3) nostalgia for the period between the two world wars ("when the nation was united and the country was one whole"). The *Golden Age* myth of the power's discourse of the past, dominated by political meanings, inaugurates the image of Moldova of Stefan the Great, „a dream of happiness in harmony, in universal order", correlated, often, with images of the present „parent" „reincarnated" and rediscovered in the ambience of the sacred spaces to explain history[6]. Undoubtedly, the epoch of revolutionary romantism, as well as the authoritarian rules, produced, a specific mythology that was paternalistic, and evoked legendary figures - even inventing them when necessary; and the political ideology carried out religious duties.

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[6] See the documentary: „Неизвестный Штефан" („Unknown Stephen the Great"), 2004, Telecompany „Mir", (director: Natalia Anisimova, scenary: Constantin Starîş, Alexandru Burian).

The myth of „the Golden age", structuring the space as sacred in the center and malefic at the periphery, is reflected perfectly in the work of Victor Stepaniuc, *Istoria şi statalitatea poporului moldovenes* (History and Statehood of Moldovan People), where history becomes again a repertoire of examples in the service of political projects. The dogmatized and ideologized history is grounded on „grand" figures, sometimes invented, that have the function of concealing the "inconvenient" ones from the collective memory. „The Year of Stefan the Great", declared by presidential decree and the „ Year of the Sixtieth Anniversary of the Liberation from the German and Fascist Occupation", celebrated ostentatiously, eclipsed other national commemorations, which created, in fact, a repertoire of propagandistic preferences, deemed by the central directives as „political weapons of Moldovenism". The second stage of the recognition of the governmental party's power refers to the symbolic legitimization, by evoking the images of the past, especially as historic/public monuments: *Capul de pod de la Şerpeni, Badea Mior*, etc. Although the motivation for these monuments is often being contested, the power sees them as symbols of the Republic of Moldova's identity, appealing to the community rituals of remembering the dead of the war, specific to the Christian-orthodox population, creating a model of civil religion. The rivalry of symbols and monopolization of the images extracted from the historical memory became the main arena of struggle for political legitimization. Therefore, in the Republic of Moldova the depth and the persistence of the historic discourse depends, often, on who is representing/exercising the power over it. In this context, we believe that the fabrication of historic myths, the invention of „new traditions" and of the „glorious past", the demolition of the old monuments and building of the new ones, represent just the most „obvious" episodes of the rivalry over the past and therefore, over the future.

Conclusion

With the independence of the Republic of Moldova, as in the case of the communities with high potential for ideological mobilization, one of the deepest crises of new authorities was related with their legitimacy. Collected bit by bit, arguments and symbols of Moldovan statehood, ad-hoc, did not create a viable paradigm and, consequently, the most acceptable solution for the political class was the return to stereotypic models and methods, to habitual socio-political archetypes. Under these conditions, the nation-building project in Moldova gradually became the main ideology of the ruling party and the support and/or establishment of the national past, and tradi-

tions and symbols became the subject of the permanent concern for the political elite of the country. Politicians, who have also remembered the ideological usefulness of historical narration, became interested in the ideological world of letters and fulfilled themselves in this field.

The invention of the past in the Republic of Moldova has become a political occupation without scientific rules in which, depending on the motivation of ideologists, "potential directions of mass mobilization" have been discovered. Having turned the discursive theory to the literary-ideological level, without any critical examination, politicians have begun to create historical myths about the historical or "golden age of the nation", trying to build a symbolic legitimacy for present-day Moldovan statehood.

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