

# ATTEMPTS AT INTRODUCING COMMUNIST RITUALS IN THE FAMILY TRADITIONS AND HOLYDAYS: CASE STUDY ON MOLDAVIAN SSR

Diana Cașu

Institute of History, Academy of Science of Moldova  
e-mail: casudiana@yahoo.com

**Rezumat: Tentative de introducere a ritualurilor comuniste în tradițiile de familie și sărbători: studiu de caz despre Republica Socialistă Sovietică Moldova**

Acest articol aduce în atenție politicile de stat menite să introducă ritualuri comuniste în familie și în tradițiile de nuntă în Uniunea Sovietică, în general, și, în special, în Moldova sovietică. Sărbătorile sovietice pot fi clasificate după cum urmează: festivaluri istorice și revoluționare, festivități dedicate diferitelor profesii sau sărbători ale profesiilor, sărbători calendaristice publice și aniversări și ritualuri de familie și cotidiene. Printre concluziile articolului se numără și aceea conform căreia, chiar dacă au fost luate toate măsurile în scopul introducerii de noi tradiții și obiceiuri în sfera familială în Moldova sovietică, ele, de regulă, nu au fost acceptate. În pofida tendinței regimului sovietic de a stabili un control strâns asupra societății, obiceiurile naționale, tradițiile, valorile culturale s-au păstrat datorită faptului că familia a rămas una dintre instituțiile sociale care nu a asimilat norme și obiceiuri improprii.

**Abstract:** This article focuses on the state policies to introduce Communist rituals in the family and wedding traditions in the Soviet Union in general and in Soviet Moldavia particularly. In general, Soviet holidays can be classified as follows: historical and revolutionary festivals, celebrations dedicated to various professions, that is, professional holidays, public holidays called dedication, calendar, and family and everyday celebrations and rituals. Among the conclusions of the article is that although all measures for the introduction of new traditions and customs in the family sphere of Soviet Moldavia have been made, they were as a rule in vain. Despite the tendency of the Soviet regime to establish the daily control on the society, after all the national customs, traditions, cultural values were preserved due to the fact that the family has remained one of those social institutions that hindered the process.

**Résumé : Tentatives d'introduction des rituels communistes dans les traditions de famille et de fête : étude de cas sur la République Socialiste Soviétique Moldavie**

L'article ci-joint met l'accent sur les politiques d'Etat conçues à introduire des rituels communistes dans la famille et dans les traditions de mariage, dans l'Union Soviétique, en général, et en spécial dans la Moldavie soviétique. On peut classer les fêtes soviétiques de la

*manière suivante: festivals historiques et révolutionnaires, les festivités dédiées aux différentes professions ou fêtes des professions, fêtes du calendrier publiques et anniversaires et rituels de famille et quotidiens. On remarque des conclusions de l'article la suivante: même si on prit des mesures ayant le but d'introduire de nouvelles traditions et coutumes dans la sphère familiale dans la Moldavie soviétique, celles-ci furent, d'habitude, en vain. Malgré la tendance du régime soviétique d'établir un contrôle quotidien sur la société, toutes les coutumes nationales, traditions et valeurs culturelles résistèrent parce que la famille y resta une des institutions sociales inchangées.*

**Keywords:** *Rituals, traditions, celebrations, propaganda, ideology, Communism, Soviet Moldavia, USSR*

According to the Communist vulgate, an important condition for the development of Soviet culture was the principle of party leadership in the cultural construction. One of the peculiarities of Soviet culture consisted in the creation of new traditions and rituals that would meet the principles of the new socialist society, and thus reflect the essence of the communist values.

Soviet culture was one of the mechanisms in moulding the community in such a way to meet the so-called communist ideal. The forms and methods of educating society were different and the nature of Soviet rituals developed on the basis of the priorities of the ideological work of the party. In general, Soviet holidays can be classified as follows: historical and revolutionary festivals, celebrations dedicated to various professions, that is, professional holidays, public holidays called dedication, calendar, and family and everyday celebrations and rituals.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, the stages of formation and development of Soviet holidays and ceremonies coincide with major periods of so-called Cultural Revolution in the USSR.

The first phase of the Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia coincides with the so-called transition from capitalism to socialism (1928-1932),<sup>2</sup> according to the ideological phraseology, a period in which all the old festivals, traditions, rites were stigmatized as anti-revolutionary, thus supposedly contradicted the new socialist regime. Holidays, which are formed during this period, had historical and revolutionary character and stress the work values.

<sup>1</sup> В. Зеленчук, Ю. Попович, *Новые традиции и обряды* [New traditions and rituals], Кишинев, 1976, с. 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> Н. М. Закович, В. А. Зоц, *Праздники и обряды как элемент советской культуры* [Celebrations and rituals as elements of the Soviet culture], accessible at [religio.rags.ru/journal/anthology1/a1\\_27.pdf](http://religio.rags.ru/journal/anthology1/a1_27.pdf)

The second stage was called the final stage of the great Cultural Revolution (1934-1936). At this stage it was supposed that there were provided all the necessary conditions for the creation of the ideological and cultural “victory of communist ideas”.

The new holidays and traditions were included in the arsenal of propaganda and agitation section and were used in the fight against the so-called harmful traditions of the past as philistinism, the pernicious influence of the church on the society and so on.

In this article, we will make an attempt to analyze the formation of family holidays and ceremonies and effects of this policy in Soviet Moldavia, created as union republic in 1940 after the Soviet occupation of Romanian Bessarabia. Before moving to a case study – the Moldavian SSR – it is important to note that the very idea of new Soviet family holidays is the result of legislative reforms of the 1920s and 1930s in the USSR. In fact, the idea that the decree of December 20, 1917 recognizing the exclusive right to register marriages registry offices led to the development of the official non-church ceremony to legitimize the marriage. The new ceremony lasted about 20 minutes, emphasizing simplicity and low levels of civic significance of the rite.

Also in the 1920s, the Young Communist League and the Women's Section invited to practice the so-called “Red Wedding”, which had more social meaning than personal. The wedding ceremony took place at the factory or in the Soviet institutions, decorated with red flags and filled with crowds of colleagues, and the oath of the spouses was associated more with social objectives.

The formation of the Soviet traditions was influenced by the struggle with the church and religious beliefs. The process of the fight against traditions considered harmful to the regime and superstitions of the church had more success in the cities than in the villages. A characteristic feature of religion in the Soviet period was the fact that it was relegated to the private sphere of the family.<sup>3</sup> And when one considers the fact that in the rural areas the big traditional family that included several generations was preserved, the process of introducing new rites was very problematic. The so-called religious vestiges of family traditions in Moldavia demanded a new approach to solving the problems posed in this mode in a national periphery of the Soviet state, since more than 77 % of the population of the Moldavian SSR lived in the villages.

The first attempts to introduce new family traditions have been taken in the 1950s, when in the MSSR were introduced new celebrations, such as the 'Komsomol weddings', 'Zvezdiny' or 'Oktyabriny'. The first Komsomol wedding

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<sup>3</sup> В. Зеленчук, Л. Д. Лоскутова, *Против вредных традиции прошлого* [Against the negative traditions of the past], Кишинев, 1962, с. 7.

was held in 1956 in the village Chobruchi, Slobozia district. This wedding was organized and in which participated the representatives of the District Committee of the Youth Communists (Komsomol), of the District Department of Culture, as well as representatives of the leadership of the local collective farm. The place of the ceremony was the local cultural house, its stage being decorated with flowers and flags as well as a portrait of Lenin and the slogans of congratulations, which were presented to the newly-weds. The main guests at the wedding were the heads of collective farm and the village council (rather than parents, relatives and friends of newly-weds as was usual in the traditional weddings), the secretary of the Komsomol committee, who took their places on stage, next to the newly-weds. The official part of the ceremony was opened with the introductory remarks by the chairman of the village council, who handed the marriage certificate to the newly-weds and congratulated the young couple on behalf of the farmers. The newly-weds received gifts from the collective farm, as well as the regional organization of the Young Communist League. It seems that it was because of the gifts that most of the young couples agreed to conduct such marriages. In this sense, D. Ivashchuk, a former secretary of the Komsomol committee, recalls that “in the village of Grigoriopol, Dubasari district, in 1958 there was a case that after the Komsomol wedding and giving the presents, I know that a week later get married and celebrated the traditional wedding according to the pattern inherited from their ancestors, and I had noticed that people at the time of the ceremony were serious, and I wanted to interrupt this silence and I have cried, «bitter [traditional way of saying that the weds should kiss each other, identical to the Russian “gor’ka!”]!» everyone looked at me with surprise, and someone asked «is this possible?»”.<sup>4</sup>

“Zvezdiny” or “Oktyabryny”<sup>5</sup> were the celebrations which were organized in the honour of the birth as well as delivery of the birth certificates. For example, in Criuleni district, on the first Sunday of the month, it was used to celebrate the holiday of the birth of a child. The ceremony took place in the house of culture (*dom kultury*, in Russian or *casa de cultura*, in Romanian), which was attended by parents of infants and numerous guests, and in the Presidium were represented the representatives of the party and Komsomol leadership. There were also Young Leninists (*okteabreata*), pioneers, Komsomol and Communist on the stage. The newborn was passed from hand to hand symbolizing thus the path that must be made new (Soviet) citizen.

<sup>4</sup> D. Ivașciuc, *Rămâne pentru totdeauna* [It is meant to be forever], in “Tinerimea Moldovei” [Youth of Moldavia], 1964, 22 October.

<sup>5</sup> V. Moldovanu, *Să însușim noile tradiții și ritualuri* [Lets implement the new traditions and rituals], in “Tribuna” [Tribune], 1976, 4 July.

It should be noted that the above mentioned inventories of the ceremonies were conducted in different ways in different regions, towns, villages, insofar as there were no standard model for such ceremonies.

To solve this problem, i.e. the introduction of certain standards of conduct of such activities, on the August 28, 1969 the Communist Party of Moldavia (CPM), jointly with the Council of Ministers of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, adopted a decree "On the introduction of the new civil ceremonies in the life of the Soviet citizens of the republic." This decree recommended to all level of the administration – city and district committees of the CPM, the executive committees of local councils of people's deputies, including the Ministry of Culture of the MSSR, trade unions, Komsomol organizations – to implement in the life of the people the new holidays and communist civic ceremonies.

At the same time, there was created a Republican Interdepartmental Committee to develop a formal part of the ceremony, as the granting of passports, registration of marriages and births. The Committee was obliged to submit for approval by the CPM Central Committee and the Council of Ministers of the Moldavian all the customs and the rules for the new ceremony. On the other hand, the local executive committees were required to create a public commission for the implementation and monitoring of the new Soviet holidays.

The transformation of family traditions and rituals in the Moldavian SSR had three areas: the rejection of certain rituals and practices that do not meet with Communist principles; reorganization of a number of traditions and rituals in the spirit of communist ideals, the creation of 'quality' of new holidays and rituals.

It should be emphasized that as a whole the tentative to create and implement the Soviet-style family celebrations in Soviet Moldavia was a failure. The majority of the local population, especially the rural majority, continued to be loyal to traditional values and celebrations. This is evidenced by a survey of the population in the early 1970s about the nature of the desired forms of rituals. In this way, the survey provided the following results: 65% of the rural population preferred wedding in compliance with all or part of the national ritual, and only about 27% of the population voted for a simple wedding feast. More exactly, among the manual workers of different qualifications, the wedding in accordance with the full or partial national ritual was favoured by 72%. At the same time, the figure for the same among the civil servants, professionals and managers was much lower and accounted for only 57%. In favour of the simple feast among the same categories were 19.4%, and respectively 33.9%.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Н. П. Лобачова, *Общесоветское и национально-специфическое в новой обрядности* [Soviet and national specificities in the new rituals], in *Традиционные и новые*

Based on this survey, one can make quite explicit and informed conclusions about what the creation of new family of Soviet holidays did not excluded – at least for a certain period of time – centuries-old national tradition, Romanian or Russian etc. As was very clear in the 1950s, it was close to impossible to exclude completely the national customs and traditions, especially in the rural areas.

There were organized theoretical and practical workshops on the implementation of new holidays and rituals. There were conducted also numerous regional and inter-district competitions: the most successful application of new rituals in practice, the most beautiful “happy room” etc.

The State Committee for the Television and Radio introduced new programs focusing on the new traditions and rituals. The Ministry of Social Welfare and the Ministry of Commerce in turn took the task of improving the supply to towns and villages goods associated with the introduction of new wedding and family traditions and rituals.

It should be noted that although attempts were made for the consolidation of new rituals and traditions, the expected results were not met. In spite of the August 28, 1969 Communist Party of Moldavia and MSSR Council of Ministers decree “On the introduction of new civil ceremonies in the life of Soviet citizens of the Republic”, decades later many people continued to practice traditional festivals and rituals. For example, in Bricheni district in 1978-1979, for 606 children there were organized “Zvezdiny” or “Oktyabriny”. At the same time 1.210 – that is, twice as many children – had been baptised in the church. A similar pattern was recorded in other areas. In Dondusheni district, 807 of newborns had been privy to new traditions. Meanwhile, there were baptised in the church almost twice as much – 1, 490 children.<sup>7</sup> In 1986, in the Straseni district there born 2266 infants, out of them 1568 were baptised in the church. In addition, out of the 857 married couples, 382 were married in the church.<sup>8</sup>

In conclusion, it should be added that, although all measures for the introduction of new traditions and customs in the family sphere have been made, they were as a rule in vain. Despite the tendency of the Soviet regime to establish the daily control on the society, after all the national customs, traditions, cultural values, were preserved due to the fact that the family has remained one of those social institutions that hindered the process.

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*обряды в быту народов СССР* [Traditional and new rituals in the life of the peoples of the Soviet Union], Москва, Издательство «Наука», 1981, с. 46.

<sup>7</sup> “Literatura și arta” [Literature and Art], 1979, 24 May.

<sup>8</sup> “Tribuna” [Tribune], 1988, 17 September.