„AT THIS SITE, A MONUMENT WILL BE INSTALLED”: CHISINAU MONUMENTS AND COMMEMORATION PRACTICES DEDICATED TO FORCED SOVIET DEPORTATIONS

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Abstract

The article deals with the politics of memory in Moldova, emphasizing the memory of the forced Soviet deportations from Moldova in 1941–1951. The article aims to analyse contemporary Moldovan politics of memory and discuss it on the example of Chisinau monuments and commemoration practices dedicated to the forced Soviet deportations. As the main theoretical concept for the analysis of the monuments serves Pierre Nora’s term lieux de memoire, which is defined as the symbolic elements of the memorial heritage of any community (Nora, 1989). In the article, three monuments are discussed: ‘Monument to the Bessarabians massacred by Bolsheviks’, ‘Monument in the Memory of Victims of the Soviet Occupation and Totalitarian Soviet Regime’ and the ‘Train of Sorrow’.

Keywords: Moldovan SSR, forced deportations, monuments, Chisinau, commemoration practices, politics of memory.

Introduction

A commemorative stone with an unusual inscription was erected in 2010 in front of the House of Government in the Moldovan capital of Chisinau: At this site, a monument commemorating the victims of the Soviet occupation and the Communist totalitarian regime will be installed. In 2020, when this article was written, it has been ten years since the temporary stone was revealed. So far, nothing indicates that the proposed monument will stand there anytime soon.

The place where the monument is located has witnessed impressive transformations over the last decades and, to a certain extent, serves as an indicator of the current political order in Moldova. Since the 19th Century, the prominent location in the city center has hosted statues of Russian Tsar Alexander I., Romanian king Ferdinand I., Soviet general, and politician Grigori Kotovskii, national hero King Ștefan cel Mare, Bolshevik revolutionary leader Vladimir Lenin and, finally, the commemorative stone promising a new monument in memory of victims of Soviet regime. This account of historical figures outlines the turbulent history of the region; ruled by Ottoman Empire, Tsarist Russia, Romanian Kingdom, and the Soviet Union, Moldova and its population had been subjected to cultural and national projects of its stronger neighbours, and, consequently, has been left with unconsolidated and contested narratives about its history, memory, and identity.

In the article, we will discuss the politics of memory in Moldova, emphasizing Soviet forced deportations. The aim is to illuminate the role the memory of Soviet deportations plays in historical narrative-making processes in contemporary Moldova using commemorative practices and monuments located in Chisinau as a vantage point. The article consists of three parts. The
first section gives an overview of the politics of memory in Moldova. The second one offers a brief introduction to the history of the forced Soviet deportations. The last one examines the monuments and commemorative practices connected with the deportations through Pierre Nora’s concepts of lieux de mémoire. This article is drawn on the Master’s thesis that I defended in 2019 at the University of Tartu, Estonia.

Politics of memory in Moldova

The questions regarding memory and identity in Moldova are uneasy ones. Inhabitants of Moldova have never internalized any deep sense of identity or national consciousness, which resulted in many contrasting and competing memories, identities, and narratives in the society [8; 14; 16; 18]. The politics of memory, a concept referring to how groups, collectivities, and nations construct and identify with particular narratives about historical periods or events [5], has been in Moldova an open field for controversies and ideological clashes. The dominant sector of society forms public notions of history through the educational system, public commemorations, popular culture, mass media, and so on. The past is formed and reshaped to suit present dominant interests; commemorative narratives serve as an emphasis of the common past and shared destiny, and constructed versions of the past establish social cohesion, legitimize authority, and socialize society [5].

To identify the reasons behind the unclear politics of memory, we need to go back into the past. Moldova is a borderland country – a ‘land between’, a disputed territory subordinated to its more powerful neighbours for most of its history. During the Middle Ages, until 1812, the territory of the nowadays Republic of Moldova was a part of the Principality of Moldova, which stretched from the Carpathians to river Nistru. After the Russian Empire had annexed the eastern part of the Principality of Moldova, on May 16, 1812, it called this land Bessarabia. It corresponds mainly, though not entirely, to the territory of nowadays Republic of Moldova. This territory was subject to the Russian Empire, the Romanian Kingdom and the Soviet Union. Each of the rulers imposed their cultural, social, economic, and political visions and strived to shape the locals accordingly. Nevertheless, the article deals with Moldovan recent past, and therefore we will concentrate on the Russian/Soviet and the Romanian era. During the Tsarist Russian period broad reforms were started: Russian was installed as the official language, indigenous Moldovan culture was pushed on the countryside while the urban population consisted predominantly of Russians, Jews, and Russified Moldovans [8]. After the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, Moldova became in 1918 part of the Romanian kingdom, and the Romanian officials started with the transformation of the mostly illiterate peasants untouched by national propaganda into the Romanian citizens
However, inhabitants of Bessarabia had only limited identification with the Romanians, and although there was a significant number of Romanian-speakers, they kept calling themselves “Moldovans” and never truly blended into Romanians. [14]. As Petrescu suggests, “Even the Romanian-speaking teachers had no knowledge of Romanian culture or history, nor any memory of a common past with the people across the river Prut. For them, historical knowledge was limited to that of Moldova, and the identity of the language was not enough to reveal the common origins with the Romanians” [14, p. 157]. Therefore, the effort to Romanise the territory of Bessarabia could be seen as another imposed identity project. When the Second World War ended, and Moldova became part of the Soviet Union, another identity project, this time Soviet, was implemented under the slogan ‘national in form, but socialist in content.’ The ‘form’ of republic remained national, but the ‘content’ was filled with Soviet ideology accompanied by heavy russification [4]. These periods – Russian, Romanian, and Soviet – influenced local inhabitants in different and often contradictory ways and left them with only minimal agency in deciding their own identity and belonging. As a result, Moldovan memory and identity have remained fragmented and contested. There has been no commonly accepted narrative or a collective story to help Moldovans organize their identity and belonging [8; 14; 16; 18].

Moldovan society has been divided by many particular issues, but the real fault line runs between so-called pan-Romanianists and Moldovanists. Pan-Romanianists claim that Moldovans belong to the Romanian family and are ethnic Romanians and that the separate Moldovan state and nation exists only due to Soviet violent intervention and social engineering [6]. On the contrary, Moldovanists are convinced that there are actual reasons behind independent Moldova and separate Moldovan nation. Although closely related, Moldovanists argue that Romanian culture and language differ from Moldovan and cannot be considered the same [6]. This division plays a crucial role in memory politics, especially regarding what will be included in the historical narrative and what will be omitted. Each of the ‘sides’ sympathise with different interpretations of the past, emphasize different historical events, and perceive different past moments as constitutional. Pan-Romanianists highlight Soviet-era crimes such as political persecutions and repressions and mass forced deportations, while the key issues for Moldovanists are Second World War, Holocaust, and the right-wing military dictatorship led by Ion Antonescu, war-time Romanian prime minister who allied with Nazi Germany [17].

Not surprisingly, the public recognition of these events depends highly on those who are currently in power. In 2001 the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM) won the election and formed a government. They, among others, launched reforms concerning politics of memory aiming
to “defend the right of the Moldovan people to their historical name moldoveni, and the name of their native language limba moldovenescă, to their own glorious history and spiritual uniqueness” [9, p. 607]. PCMR’s electorate had a mostly positive view of the Soviet period while the Romanian era was, on the contrary, perceived with suspicion. PCMR fostered the myth of the Great Patriotic War, and Victory Day became one of the most important national celebrations. Conversely, the forced Soviet deportations were pushed on the edge of the official memory. Not that the memory would have been suppressed totally, but it was not supported either and received significantly less attention than other festivals and national celebrations.

In 2009 the era of Communist rule ended under rather turbulent circumstances. Although PCRM won the parliamentary election and sought to continue its rule, opposition parties called the results manipulated and protested them. Mass demonstrations were organised, and people took the streets of Chisinau. Nevertheless, the protests soon turned into riots, and several people ended up with injuries, hundreds got arrested, and three people died [10]. After the protests, which went down into history as the ‘Twitter revolution,’ a new government represented by a coalition of pro-European parties called Alliance for European Integration was established.

The government was pronouncedly pro-European, and, in contrast to PCRM, it held an unequivocally pan-Romanian position. Besides other essential changes, it drove forward a discursive shift in the politics of memory. The government promoted celebrations that endorsed the Romanian family and emphasized historical events and historical figures connected with Romanian identity. The discourse was set up anti-Communist and anti-Soviet. As one of their first steps, the government established a Commission for the Study and Evaluation of the Communist Totalitarian Regime of the Republic of Moldova, an institutional body that aimed to research on Communist history of Moldova with the purpose of its condemnation [17, p. 244]. It is also the period when the forced Soviet deportations and their victims became more visible, and their stories started penetrating the public space and official levels of memory. July 6 was pronounced as an official commemorative day of victims of forced deportations. A new dignified monument was erected in front of the main train station, and a rather ambitious plan to put a monument dedicated to deportations’ victims in almost every Moldovan village and city was proposed. Simultaneously, the already mentioned commemorative stone in front of the House of Government was built.

After parliamentary elections in 2014 Democratic Party of Moldova (DPM) formed a new government. DPM did not have truly strong opinions regarding memory politics; neither it was explicitly favoring Moldovanism nor pan-Romanianism. The approach was rather populist as DPM was vote-
catching in both of the ‘camps.’ As the government did not want to side with one or the other, they chose to stay somewhere in between. They kept holding events commemorating the deportations; however, at the same time, they promoted celebrations connected to the Soviet period (for example, the Victory day). They did not pursue the discussion in any way and remained in a “safe zone” where they did not annoy anyone.

In 2019 new parliamentary elections were held in Moldova. The results were ambiguous and led to difficult after-election negotiations. The Party of Socialists gained 35 votes, DPM won 30 votes, the newly established liberal and pro-EU party ACUM gained 26 votes, the conservative and Moldovanists party Şor obtained 7 votes, and the last 3 votes in the 101 members Moldovan Parliament went to independent candidates. After long and tiring negotiations, a new government consisting of Socialists and ACUM was formed, electing ACUM’s Maia Sandu as the prime minister. However, the government’s lifetime was short, and it faced a vote of no confidence already after a half year of its ruling. Although any impact on the politics of memory was limited due to the government’s short existence, Sandu proposed a draft decree to follow the EU line and declare August 23 the European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism. The decree was opposed by her coalition partner and eventually abandoned [23].

**Forced Soviet deportations from Moldova**

As it was already mentioned, Moldova experienced a turbulent 20th Century, and the events of the Second World War above all have left deep traces on its inhabitants. Moldova went through so-called double occupation; in 1940, it was occupied by the Red Army and annexed to the Soviet Union, only to be retaken by joint Romanian-German forces in 1941. In 1944, however, the Soviets returned, and after fierce fights, they seized Moldova again. The territory then turned into Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic and stayed like that until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 [8].

After the annexation Soviets began to build a new social and economic order that followed the socialist pattern. Communist reforms were introduced, and the first wave of the forced deportation and political repressions followed soon. The period 1941-1951 was marked with massive forced deportations of people classified as enemies or potential troublemakers for the new Soviet order. The majority of the deportees were farmers, landowners, intelligentsia, Romanian period politicians and public figures, local leaders, religious representatives, etc. Soviet militants and local collaborators forced more than 60 000 Moldovan inhabitants to leave their homes and move to far-away Siberia or Central Asia in three successive deportation waves in 1941, 1949, and 1951. Soviet soldiers awakened the affected families during the deep night. They were
told to pack quickly (they had a maximum of forty minutes for that), only the most necessary things (the limit was forty kilos per family). Then they were taken by trucks to the nearest train station, where they were forced to board a train that took them to their place of destination in Siberia or Kazakhstan. Many deportees died either on the way or later in Siberia due to illnesses, injuries, overwork, or malnutrition [3].

In the later 1950s, the situation calmed down, and the majority of deported people were rehabilitated and allowed to return to MSSR [8].

**Monuments dedicated to forced Soviet deportations as lieux de mémoire**

We had already briefly introduced the history of forced Soviet deportations from Moldova and positioned it within contemporary Moldovan politics of memory. Now let us take a closer look at how the memory of forced Soviet deportations is embedded in the Chisinau cityscape. To analyse the cityscape, we will use the concept of French researcher Pierre Norra, who coined the term *lieux de mémoire*. Nora defines *lieux de mémoire* as: “any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community” [12, p. 17]. In other words, *lieux de mémoire* is a broad concept that encompasses various sites like museums, archives, cemeteries, memorials, and monuments, but also realms as commemorative events, books, flags, songs or festivals, and so on. According to Nora, the ‘site’ means any realm which deposits memories of a community such as a nation, an ethnic group, or a party and which is considered as an integral part of its identity [15].

On the following pages, we will analyse Chisinau monuments dedicated to victims of Soviet deportations as *lieux de mémoire*. Monuments are an essential source for upholding memory and for constituting identities. Monuments are things meant as reminders [1, p. 37]; they may remind us and may trigger our memory because they carry our memories, which we have invested into them [1, p. 37]. As it was already mentioned, forced Soviet deportations are especially important for people favouring the pan-Romanianist approach. The memory surrounding them is fundamental for their sense of identity, while rather side-lined by the Moldovanists “camp.” This ambiguous perception is, among others, displayed in the monuments dedicated to Soviet deportations. Although many Moldovan inhabitants were affected by the deportations, the first monument to commemorate them was erected only in 2010. That clearly shows the attitude and (un)willingness to launch a broader discussion about the troubled past. During my fieldwork, I became aware of three monuments dedicated to the Soviet deportations and repressions: one standing in front of the House of Government, one located on a place of war-time NKVD office, and the last one standing in front of the Main Railway Station.
Monument dedicated to ‘Bessarabians massacred by Bolsheviks’

The first monument to be discussed is located in a popular leisure-time area of Valea Morilor in central Chisinau. Valea Morilor was created in the 1950s, and during the Soviet period, it was called ‘The Central Park of Culture and Rest.’ A visitor may enjoy a wide range of different activities there: walk around or swim in a vast lake known as Komsomolsky Lake (it was named after local Komsomol whose members dig it out), admire famous cascade stairs with waterfall, visit summer theatre, have a coffee in some of the numerous local cafes, or have a walk and relax. Nevertheless, what looks like a pleasant place for family weekends also conceals a tragic past.

A few hundred meters away from the cascade stairs stands a monument dedicated to ‘Bessarabians massacred by Bolsheviks.’ During the pre-war era, there used to be situated a building of the Italian Embassy, which was transformed into an NKVD office in 1940, after the first Soviet occupation. Interrogations and mass killings of the ‘enemies of the state’ took place there, and victims’ bodies were buried in mass graves in the very residency’s garden. In 1941, after the Romanian and Nazis army took over the city, the location was investigated, the victims exhumed, and the killings’ documentation was used in anti-Communist propaganda. However, during the Soviet offensive in 1944, Chisinau was severely bombed, and the NKVD office building was destroyed. In the following Soviet period, there was, for obvious reasons, no information about the infamous character of the place. Chisinau municipality even constructed an open-air dancing stage nearby, which was very popular, especially during the 1960s and 1970s.

The collective amnesia outlived the fall of the Soviet Union, and it was not until 2010 when a small monument was erected to commemorate all the victims who had lost their lives there. Although the monument was revealed, it has not attracted much attention. Except for 2018, when it became a venue for a commemorative event held near Saint Seraphim of Sarov church, it has not seen any annual commemorations [24]. Its condition is dismal; it is half-forgotten and poorly maintained. Moreover, Chisinau municipality recently rented the site to a neighbouring restaurant that decided to set up a terrace there. The decision has been questioned neither by the municipality nor by any other official body.

Moreover, due to the construction works, the monument was moved from its original place to a new location over a road. The relocation of the monument and the simple fact that construction works had been underway on a place where hundreds of people lost their lives did not spark any outrage or any discussion. Almost nobody protested the intention, which only underlines that the events have been largely forgotten and the memory profoundly disrupted. The official body allowing the construction only confirms the unclear memory politics and approaches towards the recent past.
Monument in the Memory of Victims of the Soviet Occupation and Totalitarian Soviet Regime aka the ‘Ghimpu stone’

The monument located in front of the House of Government was already mentioned several times in the article; however, it undoubtedly deserves its own chapter. The ‘Monument in the Memory of Victims of the Soviet Occupation and Totalitarian Soviet Regime’ is closely connected with Mihai Ghimpu, the then head of the Liberal Party, the Chairman of the Parliament, and interim President of the Republic of Moldova (September 2009–December 2010). Ghimpu was strongly pan-Romanianist and acted openly for reunification with Romania [17, p. 245]. Besides creating the above-mentioned ‘Commission for the Study and Evaluation of the Communist Totalitarian Regime of the Republic of Moldova,’ Ghimpu also decreed June 28 as the Day of Soviet Occupation and Commemoration of the Victims of the Communist Totalitarian Regime to remember the Soviet occupation on June 28, 1940. This decree was, however, met with disapproval and canceled soon after [19].

Another Ghimpu’s effort to ‘deal with the Soviet past’ was the already mentioned Monument in the Memory of Victims of the Soviet Occupation and Totalitarian Soviet Regime [20]. In 2010 the Liberal Party initiated its construction and placed it in a prominent location in the city centre where all important monuments had ever stood [2]. That was an unequivocally highly symbolic gesture – the apparent intention to put the memory of Soviet atrocities in the centre of the capital, in the very place where all the significant political changes and shifts have been manifested during Moldovan history. However, this idea met with protests. Not everybody understood the Soviet time as either occupation or totalitarian regime, and, therefore, categorically refused such a
The whole endeavour led to a somewhat puzzling end as the only tangible result became the stone with an inscription saying, ‘In this place will stand a monument to victims of Soviet occupation and communist totalitarian regime.’ Since then, nothing has happened. Nobody has had enough political will and courage to either tear down the stone ultimately or finally construct the proposed monument. Instead of that, the stone has been standing there as a monument to Moldovan people’s indecisiveness about their recent past. It sums up quite well the ongoing debates and competing narratives surrounding the Soviet period.

The Train of Sorrow

The last monument discussed in this article is called the ‘Train of Sorrow,’ and it was revealed in 2013 in front of the Chisinau Main Railway Station. The ‘Train of Sorrow’ is the first monument in Chisinau dedicated solely to victims of forced Soviet deportations. It remains surprising that the deportees were not given their first monument until 2013, which means seventy-two years after the first wave of deportations.

This place had become the main venue for annual commemorative events taking place on July 6, a day when back in 1949, the most massive wave of deportations was launched. On July 6, the ‘Train of Sorrow’ is being visited by survivors of deportations, family members, and activists, historians, and politicians. However, the number of Moldovans without any family connections with deportations (e.g., no family member had been deported) who would come to commemorate these events is relatively low. Considering the survivors’ increasing age, the commemorative events are becoming less and less visited every year. The commemorations have remained rather personal and intimate acts and are important only for a specific society layer. Moreover, many consider it a manifestation of anti-Russian and pro-Romanian sentiment, as some people who are actively involved in the commemorations are also openly pan-Romanists.
The July 6 commemoration event is simple; people bring flowers and candles, politicians, and mainly Prime Minister, lay flowers, and hold speeches. Sometimes the names of victims would be read aloud. All the flags on official buildings are half-staff. The tradition of this commemoration was launched by Liberal Democratic Party and its Prime Minister Vlad Filat, who was quite active and, to some extent, advocated for the former deportees. His government introduced a pension for the survivors, albeit it was a ridiculous amount of money even to the reality of Moldova.

During the 2018 commemorations, unsatisfied survivors confronted Prime Minister Pavel Filip of the Democratic Party and demanded more support and recognition from the state [22]. They complained that it is impossible to make a living out of the little pension they obtain [21]. The commemoration thus might also serve as a way how to address respective politicians and demand some changes.

Conclusion

Since the independence in 1991, the Republic of Moldova has been searching for its new post-Soviet identity. The problematics of contested and fragmented memory of the Soviet past is one of the most significant challenges this country faces in its attempt to reconceptualise its identity and shape its future direction. The article aimed to analyse contemporary memory politics in Moldova and discuss it on the example of Chisinau monuments and commemoration practices dedicated to forced Soviet deportations.

For the theoretical framework, it was used Pierre Nora’s concept of lieux de memoire. It was mentioned that Nora defines lieux de memoire as: “any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial
heritage of any community”. However, as argued, the memory of Soviet forced deportations has become a “symbolic element of the memorial heritage” for only a segment of Moldovan society, particularly pan-Romanianists. The deportations’ memory has attracted broader recognition only after the discursive shift in 2010; nevertheless, it has never become commonly accepted as a constitutive part of shared Moldovan identity. The Chisinau monuments confirm the memory’s ambiguity and reveal the unclarity of official memory politics, people’s indifference, widespread historical amnesia, competing narratives, and Moldovan officials’ unwillingness to step out of the simple populism that rests on keeping the status quo. The mentioned monuments serve as good examples for this claim.

Firstly, the monument dedicated to ‘Bessarabians massacred by Bolsheviks’ shows historical amnesia and popular indifference. It is poorly maintained and half-forgotten, but the most striking was its relocation that went unheeded. The lack of respect to political repressions victims might be, to some extend, understandable from a commercial subject such as a restaurant; however, the unconcern from the municipality side is more deeply connected with the challenges of memory politics. Secondly, the ‘provisional’ monument standing in front of the House of Government, promising for already ten years construction of a proper monument to all the ‘victims of the Soviet occupation and totalitarian Soviet regime,’ can be seen more like a monument of the unclear Moldovan memory politics. Finally, the ‘Train of Sorrow’, the only monument that has become a symbol of the deportations, and eventually also the leading venue for annual commemorations; it is symptomatic that it was erected only in 2013 – seventy-two years after the first wave of deportations.

Notes
1 In original (Romanian): În acest loc va fi amplasat monumentul victimelor ocupației sovietice și ale regimului totalitar comunist.

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Rezumat

„ÎN ACET LOC VA FI AMPLASAT UN MONUMENT”: MONUMENTELE DIN CHIȘINĂU ȘI PRACTICILE COMEMORATIVE DEDICATE DEPORTĂRILOR FORȚATE SOVIETICE. Articolul abordează politicile memoriei în Moldova, evidențiind amintirea deportărilor sovietice forțate din Moldova, din anii 1941-1951. Lucrarea urmărește să analizeze politicile contemporane ale memoriei din Moldova și să le pună în discuție, luând drept exemplu monumentele din Chișinău și politicile comemorative consacrate deportărilor forțate sovietice. În calitate de concept teoretic de bază, în analiza monumentelor, servește sintagma lui Pierre Nora „liex de memoire” [loc al memoriei]. Acesta e definit drept elementul simbolic al patrimoniului memorial al fiecărei comunități (Nora, 1989).

În cadrul articolului sunt puse în discuție trei monumente: „Monumentul basarabenilor masacrați de bolșevici”, „Monumentul dedicat Memoriei Victimelor Ocupației Sovietice și ale Regimului Sovietic Totalitar” și „Trenul Durerii”.

Cuvinte-cheie: RSS Moldovenească, deportări forțate, monumente, Chișinău, practici comemorative, politici ale memoriei.

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