

POST-COMMUNIST POLITICAL SYMBOLISM:  
NEW MYTHS – SAME OLD STORIES?  
AN ANALYSIS OF ROMANIAN POLITICAL  
MYTHOLOGY

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**Abstract:**

This article applies a case-study approach in examining the relation between cultural and political myths. It looks at post-communist political myths and questions the extent to which they are new creations or recycled narratives, re-using frames already present in the public arena, thus benefiting from the resonances they carry within the collective memory of a nation. The hypothesis advanced by this article is that the “archetypes” developed and propagated through cultural myths form the basis of construction for political myths, allowing them to travel through time. Consequently, by exploiting the patterns set by one nation’s cultural myths, political myths are perpetuated from one period to another although new faces and details are used to flesh out the script. I argue that a better understanding of cultural myths could provide an explanation about why a particular political myth has been created and become successful.

**Keywords:** archetypes, political myths, post-communism, Romania

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This article examines post-communist political myths and questions the extent to which they are new creations or recycled narratives, re-using frames already present in the public arena thus benefiting from the resonances they already carry within the collective memory of a nation. As such, I look at the relation between cultural and political myths. The cultural myths offer what was identified as “archetype”, meaning “exemplary model” or “paradigm.”<sup>1</sup> The hypothesis advanced by this study is that these “archetypes” form the basis of construction for political myths allowing them to travel in time. Consequently, by exploiting the patterns set by one nation’s cultural myths, political myths are perpetuated from one period to another although new faces and details are used to fill in the script. I argue that a better understanding of cultural myths could provide an explanation about why a particular political myth has been created and become successful. The exercise applies a case-study approach by looking at the first decade of Romanian post-communist politics.

The symbolic is important for any student of politics since it “is not a residual dimension of purportedly real politics,” “an insubstantial screen upon which real issues are cast in pale and passive form,” but rather “real politics, articulated in a special and often most powerful way.”<sup>2</sup> Since politics is a continual struggle over meanings and signification,<sup>3</sup> understanding the political process requires an analysis of “how the symbolic enters into politics, how political actors consciously and unconsciously manipulate symbols, and how this symbolic dimension relates to the material bases of political power.”<sup>4</sup> Eastern European studies in general, and post-communism studies in particular, are characterised by a continuous struggle to understand the change and developments in the region especially when they refuse to follow a predicted pattern. Increasingly, Eastern European scholars came to acknowledge that post-communist changes have been much more profound than just a replacement of one political regime by another and that the academia needs to diversify the elements of analysis. Since post-communism was more than just about forming

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1 See M. Eliade (1989), *The Myth of the Eternal Return or, Cosmos and History*, London: Arkana. M.

Eliade (1963), *Myths and Reality*, New York: Harper and Row

2 Kertzer D. I. (1988), *Ritual, Politics, and Power*, p.5.

3 Verdery K. (1999), *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies - Reburial and Postsocialist Change*, Columbia University Press, p. 24.

4 Kertzer, op. cit., pp.2-3

parties, having free elections, setting up independent banks, rewriting books, or restoring property rights, the ‘dry’ sense of politics, complex as it may be, tended to ignore perhaps the most dramatic change of the post-1989 period, the one that occurred at the level of culture and civilisation.<sup>5</sup> Cultural processes embrace the soft tissue of society, the intangible assumptions, premises, understandings, rules, and values. Scholars have therefore focused upon the role of culture in politics and in particular on political symbolism by including meanings, feelings, the sacred, the non-rational, and the imaginary, into an otherwise rational framework.<sup>6</sup>

### The Use of Myths in Politics

“Myth” is a fashionable word. Its frequent use – stretched almost to the point of abuse – contains a high degree of ambiguity and dictionaries offer a wide range of definitions. By and large, it seems that almost everything that keeps us more or less distant from reality is susceptible to becoming “a myth.” Myths are necessary constructions since we cannot live outside the imaginary: “Everyone needs myths. Individuals need myths. Nations need myths.”<sup>7</sup> Reality itself (whether persons or events) can be transformed into a myth through distortions, adaptations or interpretations. However, not just any distortion can compose a myth. The myth assumes the telling of an essential truth and therefore it carries a profoundly symbolic meaning. It presents at the same time a system of interpretation and an ethical code or a behavioural model. The truth is not abstract, but it is understood as a leading principle in the life of that particular community. The myth has a strong capacity for integration and simplification, showing a tendency to reduce the diversity and the complexity of the phenomena at a specific axis of interpretation. A myth is therefore an “imaginary construction (which means neither ‘real’ nor ‘unreal’, but disposed according to the rules of the imaginary), having the purpose of showing the essence of the cosmic and social phenomena, strongly linked with the fundamental values of

5 Sztompka P. (1996), “Looking Back: The Year 1989 as a Cultural and Civilisational Break”, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, vol. 29, no.2, pp. 115-129.

6 see Tismaneanu V. (1993), *Reinventing Politics: Eastern Europe from Stalin to Havel*, New York: Free Press. Tismaneanu V. (1998), *Fantasies of Salvation: Myths and Legends in Post-Communist Politics*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. Verdery K. (1991), *National Ideology Under Socialism. Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu's Romania*, University of California Press. Verdery (1999), op. cit. G. Hosking, G. Schopflin eds. (1997), *Myths & Nationhood*, London: Hurst & Co.

7 Davies N., “Polish National Mythologies” in Hosking, Schopflin (1997), op. cit., p.141.

the community and with the purpose of ensuring the cohesion of the former.”<sup>8</sup>

The study of myths has been imported into political studies through the work of anthropologists (Durkheim, Claude Levi-Strauss) and scholars of religious study (Mircea Eliade). Influenced by Greek rationalist philosophy, anthropologists view the ‘myths’ as a category of fictitious discourse, a form of speech opposed to the reasoned discourse of the logic. As such, myths are fictitious stories about the past belonging to the domain of the phantasmagorical. They are also narratives showcasing the fantastic origins of a people. Consequently, myth is a “discourse opposed both to truth (myth is fiction) and to the rational (myth is absurd).”<sup>9</sup> The trend in today’s anthropology is to examine the context of the use of myths in everyday life, the role of myths in the framing of daily practice, and the relation of the poetics of myths to the understanding of everyday life. While there is a broad consensus that myths are beliefs, theorists from various fields established that it is misleading to say they are invented, because myths can be based on facts.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, for a narrative to be called a ‘myth,’ it needs to be accepted as true, to explain the present experience and to justify its practical purpose to the ones who believe in it.<sup>11</sup>

This article does not argue that myths are representing the truth but adopts the view that the issue of their truthfulness or accuracy as a historical account is secondary. It is not its truthfulness that is relevant, but its very existence, its content and the fact that there is a community that believes in it.<sup>12</sup> Myths carry symbolic power. They are “constantly repeated, often re-enacted” and therefore “essentially propagated for their effect rather than their truth value.”<sup>13</sup> They are “sets of simplified beliefs, which may or may not approximate reality, but which give us a sense of our origins, our identity, and our purposes.”<sup>14</sup> At the same time,

8 Boia L. (1997), *Istorie și mit în conștiința românească* (History and Myth in the Romanian Consciousness), Bucharest: Humanitas, p. 8.

9 Overing J., “The Role of Myth: an Anthropological Perspective, or : The Reality of the Really Made-Up”, in Hosking, Schopflin, op.cit., p. 12.

10 H. Tudor (1972), *Political Myth*, The Pall Mall Press, p. 13.

11 G. Schöpflin (2002), *Nations Identity Power: The New Politics of Europe*, London: Hurst & Company.

12 Schöpflin G. (1997), “The Functions of Myth and a Taxonomy of Myths” in Hosking, Schopflin, op.cit., p.19. See also Eliade argument that a myth is always a story believed to be true and that it serves as an explanation for some aspect of men’s present experience.

13 Fulbrook M., “Myth-Making and National Identity: the case of G.D.R.”, in Hosking, Schopflin, op.cit., p.72.

14 Davies, op.cit., p.141.

political mythologies are not atemporal archetypes but “react to and evaluate existing forms of human organisation, legitimise or expose political structures, and often propose either past or future-oriented alternatives.”<sup>15</sup> Hence, to distinguish between “truth” and “untruth” when talking about myths would be misleading. A scholar should not seek to establish whether a myth is true or false, but to use it as instrument for understanding a community or a nation.<sup>16</sup>

Characterised by discontinuity, fragmentation, confusion, collective passions, fears, illusions, and disappointments, the post-communist era was and still is susceptible to the influence of myths. Since “the function of the myth is to create a state of mind,”<sup>17</sup> such environment gives the myth “the power not only to offer relatively facile explanations for perceived victimhood and failure but also to mobilise, energise, and even instigate large groups into action.”<sup>18</sup> Two reasons can explain why post-communism was bound to be a highly “mythologised” era. One relates to its own nature: up until not very far ago, post-communism was a myth itself, as life after communism was unthinkable. Secondly, the fall of communism led to a discursive vacuum and post-communism needed its own language to replace a defunct vocabulary that supported an elaborate political mythology. The “scientific mythology of communism”<sup>19</sup> included myths such as the new society and the new man (or what Alesandr Zinoviev called Homo Sovieticus), the fight against nature, and reinvention of history. The newly emerged narrative discourses, some called “fantasies of salvation,”<sup>20</sup> replaced “socialism,” “classless society,” “vanguard party,” “plan,” and “fearless leader” with concepts such as “democracy,” “market,” “nation,” “Europe,” and “civil society.”

In post-communism, the functions of myths are twofold: covering the ideological vacuum and facilitating transition. Post-communist societies have lost their known system of references, and traditional ideologies and political dichotomies cannot account for the world around. Due to the weakness of liberal and democratic traditions, people have little patience for rational interpretations of the dramatic changes

15 Tismaneanu (1998), op.cit., p. 26.

16 Boia (1997), op.cit., p. 7.

17 Berlin I. (1982), *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, New York: Penguin Books, pp.318-319.

18 Tismaneanu (1998), op.cit., p.6.

19 Boia L. (1999), *Mitologia științifică a comunismului*, Bucharest: Humanitas (translated from French, La Mythologie scientifique du communisme, Paradigme, Caen-Orleans, 1993).

20 Tismaneanu (1998), op.cit.

that affect their lives and revert to old doctrines and visions that carry a familiar logic. Myths are ways of explaining the fate of a community and accounting for failure and negative outcomes of particular strategies.<sup>21</sup> Political myths provide ready-made answers for processes too complicated for people caught in the ideological vacuum. However, in order to be effective in galvanising the spirits, they have to resonate with already-present frames in the collective memory.<sup>22</sup> While investigating post-communist myths, the purpose of this article is to examine the connection between cultural and political myths by identifying the archetypes upon which political myths are constructed, thus benefiting from their resonance with the national mental stereotypes. Two basic types of myths have been identified in literature: “foundational,” or narratives about the beginnings and the origins of a community, and “eschatological,” or narratives about the end destination of a community. The latter are based on George Sorel’s definition of myth as “a vision of the future which makes crude but practical sense of the present.”<sup>23</sup> While cultural myths tend to be foundational myths, political myths are eschatological myths. To construct or justify a point of arrival, eschatological myths use as a point of origin the frames developed by foundational myths. Similarly, political myths reference to the frames previously developed and established within the collective memory by cultural myths. As far as post-communism is concerned, archetypes help support the newly emerging political discourses such as European integration, liberal democracy and market economy as well as the nationalist/populist oriented discourse.

### How New Are the New Myths?

The four main fundamental political myths identified in literature are Unity, the Saviour, the Conspiracy Theory and the Golden Age. Their origins have been traced back to religious myths and fiction creations.<sup>24</sup> These myths remain valid, as they are independent of political ideology though they may be used by political elites and adapted to fit the needs of their respective ideologies. They also remain valid because they usually share underlying elements with a nation’s myths of creation or myths of

21 See K. Verdery (1995), *National Ideology Under Socialism*, University of California Press and G. Schopflin (2002), *Nations Identity Power*, London: C. Hurst & Co.

22 Schopflin (2002), op. cit.

23 see G. Sorel (1990), *Réflexions sur la violence*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil. See also Eliade argument that a myth is always a story believed to be true and that it serves as an explanation for some aspect of men’s present experience.

24 Girardet R. (1986), *Mythes et Mythologies Politiques*, Paris: Editions du Seuil

origin. I argue that as they rely upon a common denominator, political myths perpetuate themselves over time. Though using different symbols, political myths employ pre-existing frames and an already established dynamic. In this way, they repackage an old story in order to galvanise passions, canvass support and stir energies with the objective of achieving electoral success or acceptance of a specific government policy. To understand why such structures are successful means to understand the mental patterns that generated them in the first place. By tracing these sources to more general cultural creations and examining them, we would be able to identify the archetypes upon which current political mythology resides.

This article looks at three Romanian cultural myths that have been exploited by political elites to furnish a political message resonant with the nation's symbolic heritage. The choice of the three cultural myths is based on the study of the Romanian leading literary critic, George Calinescu.<sup>25</sup> He identified three fundamental myths: "Traian and Dochia," "Mesterul Manole" (The Craftsman Manole) and "Miorita" (The Lamb). Anonymous popular creations, they have been collected by folklorists and members of the literary circles during the nineteenth century (such as Vasile Alecsandri). Regarded as prized possessions of the patrimony of Romanian literature, each of them offered the outline of various archetypes and symbols later to be used successfully as political material by skilful political actors and transformed into national mythology.

Every myth is a story about the quest of origin.<sup>26</sup> The desire to prove the 'noble origin' and 'antiquity' of one's people is a common feature throughout Eastern Europe. This phenomenon has been explained as being the result of a lack of written history: these are "people without history' (read: without historical documents or without historiography) 'as if they did not exist.'" "To have a well-established 'origin' meant, when all was said and done, having the advantage of a noble origin." However, while the fascination with the origin of a nation is understandable for a relatively young nation, it may lead to what was called "cultural provincialism."<sup>27</sup>

The noble origins of Romanians are traced back to Rome and the consciousness of Latin descent was accompanied by a kind of mystical

25 Calinescu G. (1982), *Istoria Literaturii Romane*, Bucuresti: Editura Minerva, p. 56.

26 Eliade M., (1982), *A History of Religious Ideas*, Chicago & London: Chicago University Press.

27 Eliade (1963), *op.cit.*, p. 182

contribution to the greatness of Rome. “*Traian and Dochia*”<sup>28</sup> is the Romanian myth of origin and narrates metaphorically the birth of the Romanian nation, namely through the intertwining of Dacs and Romans. The story is also recounted in history books that tell us that during the Roman occupation the Roman soldiers established families with Dacs women, so that in 273 BC, at the moment of the Aurelian withdrawal from Dacia, part of the Roman soldiers remained in Dacia. The quest of origin is undertaken in an attempt of rediscovering the Primordial Time – the time when perfection was achieved. Thus, the time of origin carries an aura of purity. The promise of a Golden Age represents a powerful persuasive element in the vocabulary of any political discourse, since it builds upon hopes of a better life.

During both communism and post-communism, ruling elites have been keen to promote a discourse that promises the advent of such a time. The difference between communism and post-communism is the temporal perception of this period. Whereas in the Romanian version of communist ideology the Golden Age was placed in the future (“communism is the road to socialism and the perfect society”), post-communist discourse places it in the past, more precisely the inter-war period. The revolutions of 1989 have been actually characterised as revolutions of recuperation<sup>29</sup>, as a returning to the point at which evolution was brutally interrupted by the communist regime. The inter-war period is Eastern Europe’s first democratic experiment and marks the creation of independent nation states. Regarded with melancholy and affection, its failure to avoid or curb the resurgence of nationalism and extreme right movements is either forgotten or forgiven. Certain political leaders are portrayed as role models despite the fact that they led authoritarian, militaristic regimes.<sup>30</sup> For Romania, the inter-war period also represented the zenith in geopolitical terms, as this was the time of Greater Romania. Political and cultural figures have been taken out from history and literature textbooks and their roles have been re-examined. While some were glorified and others demonised, condemnation and praise carried the same intensity (i.e. King Ferdinand and Queen Maria,

<sup>28</sup>Traian is the Roman Emperor who led two campaigns against the Dacs and was successful at the second attempt. Dochia, the legend says, was King Decebal’s (the King of the Dacs) daughter

<sup>29</sup> Habermas J. (1991), ‘What Does Socialism Mean Today? The Revolutions of Recuperations and the Need for New Thinking’, in R. Blackburn (ed.), *After the Fall: The Failure of Communism and the Future of Socialism*, London: Verso, pp.26-7

<sup>30</sup> Marshal Pilsudski in Poland, Admiral Horthy in Hungary, Marshal Antonescu in Romania. Their cult has been apparent during the 1990s especially when their reburials took place.



party leaders such as Ionel Bratianu, Liberal Party, and Iuliu Maniu, National Peasant Party, who died as political prisoner in the 1950s at Sighet, Marshal Antonescu, King Michael, Eugen Ionescu, Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran, and Constantin Noica). The cultural golden age generation is often absolved for its pro-Iron Guardist sympathies, the latter being dismissed as mistakes of youth. Arguments to the contrary are subjected to public condemnation.<sup>31</sup> An interesting post-communist phenomenon is the way in which both sides of the Romanian political arena<sup>32</sup> have adopted different inter-war heroes, continuing, in a fascinating process of time contraction, the same political divergences of fifty years ago. For example, the reformed communists glorify the figure of Marshal Antonescu (conveniently enough, he is dead, making the mystifications much more easy to construct), a paradoxical choice given Antonescu's harsh policy towards the Communist Party and his trial and execution by the first communist government, but motivated by the attempt to counterbalance the anti-communists' choice, King Michael. This process of sanctification creates in the public arena demigods whose role model status is unquestionable. This phenomenon shows a propensity towards Leninist thinking. It produces a dogmatic political discourse reminiscent of an authoritarian regime rather than paving the way for the emergence of an open discursive arena, characteristic of a functional democracy.

Apart from representing the act of birth of the Romanian nation, the Daco-Roman genetic blend provides one of the most important features of Romanian national identity: its Latinity. Linguistic studies have been conducted to establish scientifically the proportion of Latin elements within the Romanian language.<sup>33</sup> Two powerful political myths have been and are dependent upon language: unity and the "return to Europe." While in explaining unity, language is a crucial element (Romanians are those sharing the same language) and the linguistic heritage – a secondary consideration, for the Romanian quest to prove its Europeanness, the linguistic heritage is crucial.

In the process of European integration, national cultural and political elites have emphasised those features that make the country at once special

31 See the debates and controversies surrounding the publication of Laignel-Lavastine A. (2002), *Cioran, Eliade, Ionesco. L'oubli du fascisme, trois intellectuels roumains dans la tourmente du siècle*, Paris: PUF.

32 More than left and right, the division in Romanian politics should be regarded as communist or neo-communist versus anti-communists, which became later in the 1990s anti-reformists versus reformists.

33 see for example Stoiciu A. (1995), *Fiction et realite identitaire. Le cas de la Bessarabie*, Montreal: Humanitas. The proportion of Latin is placed at 77%.

and European. Language was Romania's ace. In Romania, "to speak of 'Europe' is (as has been for two centuries) at one and the same time a statement of political intentions and a statement of national identity."<sup>34</sup> For relatively young nations, demonstrating one's European identity is seen as a guarantee of national identity. The essence of Romanian identity has been linked to language.<sup>35</sup> The latter is treated with deference and often referred to as a "miracle." The obsessive concern with language can have negative implications. Some analysts have argued that obsession with language has in time created a "mentality of islanders" – an island of Latinity in a Slavic ocean. The belief that "ours is a nation under siege" has provided fertile ground for various conspiracy theories to take root.<sup>36</sup>

Conspiracy theories provide the basis for explanations of Romanian misfortunes and shortcomings. Though present during communism, such narratives of anti-Romanian conspiracy were less diversified than in post-communism simply because there were fewer alternative discourses; consequently, the "official" conspiracy was dominant. In the post-communist period there was an inflation of discourses identifying the sources of all troubles. Elaborate conspiracy theories offered justifications for Romania's difficult transition and for the slow pace of the process of integration into European structures.

"Somebody wants the country miserable. Things are going bad: prices are up. Corruption is worse. Nobody works properly. European integration is delayed. We fight with each other. The political parties split. The country is in crisis. The reason? Conspiracy. Sabotage. Somebody. Somebody sells the country. Somebody buys it. If you ask who this 'somebody' is, the answers are politically coloured, and somehow according to custom: the Jews, the Masons, the Hungarians, the Russians (the KGB), the Americans (the CIA), the Government ("foreign agencies"), the Opposition (communists, Securitate agents), the French socialists, the Catholics (the Pope!), the intellectuals, the peasants (with their political primitivism). In short, almost everybody. But everybody understood as "the other" in the most Foucauldian sense. Somebody is always somebody else."<sup>37</sup>

34 K. Verdery "Civil Society or Nation? 'Europe' in the Symbolism of Postsocialist Politics" in K. Verdery (1996), *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 105.

35 see Noica C. (1991), *Pagini despre sufletul românesc*, Bucuresti: Humanitas

36 see S. Antohi (1999), *Imaginaire culturel et réalité politique dans la Roumanie moderne. Le stigmat et l'utopie*, Paris: L'Harmattan.

37 see A. Plesu, "Cineva, Altcineva, Nimeni" ("Somebody, Somebody else, Nobody"), *Dilema*, no. 20, 28 May – 3 June 1993; translated by this author.

Hence, the fault was and is attributed to somebody quite impossible to pin down. By placing the fault in the realm of the general, these theories offer an explanation without really identifying the person/s responsible. The main goal of conspiracy theories is not so much finding someone to blame as absolving the Romanians from responsibility.

*“Mesterul Manole”* recounts the story of the building of Curtea de Arges, the Romanian Orthodox monastery that became the official church of the princes of Wallachia and later the kings and queens of Romania. The story tells that the big potentate of the time, Neagoe Basarab, ordered craftsman Manole to build the most beautiful construction on the face of the earth. After endless attempts and continuous failures – the walls would not survive the night – Manole had a dream that imparted the need for a human sacrifice: the first human that approached the site in the morning would need to be walled in alive. That person would be Ana, Manole’s wife. On the wall that faces sunrise, a stain marks the place. The most important thing in this myth, though, is not the sacrifice, dramatic as this is, but the fact that the walls Manole built during the day were destroyed during the night. The Romanians, some argue,<sup>38</sup> are “builders of ruins.” In a 1940s play bearing the same name as the popular myth, the philosopher Lucian Blaga conjured up the dialogue between Manole and the spirits. At Manole’s desperate entreaty one morning, “Who is destroying my walls? Who?” a voice will answer him: “It’s the Powers!” The “powers” is a word that would shape the history of Romanian provinces and later Romania itself, whether under the Ottomans, the Russians, the Austro-Hungarians, the French, the Soviets or the Americans. The powers mean some secret all-powerful circle of individuals that has as its purpose the destruction of the country. The conspiracy theory is a powerful archetype since it can grant absolution.

Conspiracy theories have high currency in Eastern Europe. This is hardly surprising given that its destinies have been repeatedly decided somewhere else, by somebody else. Conspiracy theories take a lot of space in political debates and newspaper articles. Hungarian (concerning Transylvania) or Judeo-Masonic conspiracies (concerning almost everything else) are popular but American and Soviet/Russian conspiracies are particularly powerful. The past fifty years have been marked by the symbol of “Yalta”; therefore, “the Yalta syndrome” is one

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38 Laurentiu Ulici, interview with the author, January 3, 2000.

of the most important psychological characteristics of Eastern European mentality.<sup>39</sup> The common nightmare is that one day the world would be divided again into spheres of influence and yet again Eastern Europe would end up on the wrong side of the wall. During both communism and post-communism, “Yalta” was an important symbol although its meaning was different. For the former, it marked the act of its creation, while for the latter it provided a vindication of all the misfortunes that befell the region since 1989.

Unfortunately, 1989 did not bring an end to this type of discourse. The year of birth of post-communism coincided with yet another Soviet-American meeting, in Malta. Romania has been traditionally vulnerable to this type of discourse. The percentages believed to have been agreed on in Yalta between Stalin and Churchill (the Soviet Union – 90 percent, the West – 10 percent) were evoked as a means of explaining the distorted forms of Romanian communism. At the XIV Congress of the Romanian Communist Party in November 1989, Ceausescu himself warned against a “new Yalta.” The hysteria fuelled by the meeting at Malta in 1989 between George Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev is relevant in this respect. Irresistible due to its phonetic closeness, the connection “Yalta-Malta” became a constant presence in the political discourse in the early 1990s and was used to explain the West’s limited interest in the country. Fears of a new deal between the West and Russia increased. The meeting between presidents Clinton and Eltsin in 1997 was subjected to a similar sort of reasoning.<sup>40</sup> The image of the protagonists was enough to trigger a fit of panic: Eltsin, looking at the time very much in shape, and Clinton, limping due to a ski accident and propping himself on a crutch. The signs were all there. History was repeating itself: a tough Russian president (Stalin – Eltsin) and an almost disabled American president (Roosevelt – Clinton). While in Western Europe or America such a reading would be met with amusement, in Bucharest it would send shivers down spines. The decisions of the NATO summit in Madrid in 1997 (i.e. Romania was denied entry to NATO in the first wave) reinforced these views. In the wake of European integration, conspiracy theories have incorporated both “Brussels” among the conspirators and ill-meaning domestic politicians seeking to sabotage Romania’s accession. Malicious intent has been consequently attributed to EU officials acting as gatekeepers for Romania’s EU membership (such as the EU commissioner for

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39 Gabanyi A. U., “Sindromul Yalta’ in Romania”, *Sfera Politicii*, no. 76/1999, pp.6-19.

40 see the mainstream media coverage at the time.

enlargement, the European Parliament rapporteurs for Romania, such as Baroness Nicholson, among others) and EU heads of state and government interested solely in their own position in the balance of power within the EU (i.e. reactions to president Chirac's declarations following the signing of the Vilnius letter).

The inclination to subscribe to conspiracy scenarios is related to another phenomenon in Romanian post-communism – “spyonite,” transmitted through the virus of suspicion. Everyone is regarded as a potential spy. The anti-Communist parties accused the neo-communists of being KGB agents. The latter accused the former of being paid by the CIA.<sup>41</sup> The Securitate has become a “state of mind,”<sup>42</sup> and rumours about how many agents Securitate actually had are rampant. Former dissidents were regarded with suspicion: they did not act because of courage but under orders: dark shadows told them to test the waters, tricking others into expressing their feelings while being unprotected. In a country where dissent had been a feature of individual rather than of organised action, the courage of a tiny minority is difficult to fathom. The atmosphere of suspicion has held firm throughout the first decade of post-communist history because of Romania's slowness to open its secret files. After endless months of deliberations and amendments, the lustration law was finally passed by parliament in 1999 even though its final provisions were significantly diluted.<sup>43</sup> The functioning of the institution in charge of investigating the files (CNSAS – the National College for the Study of the State Archives) has been plagued by difficulties (e.g. accessing information and identifying agents' names) and arguments among its members regarding the publication of their findings. This environment of suspicion has given currency to home-grown conspiracy theories. The cronies of the previous regime are omnipresent (in the guise of politicians, economic magnates or magistrates) and control Romania's destiny. The protagonists of the home-grown conspiracy theory are not ill-intentioned outsiders but Romanians undermining the national cause.

Propensity towards creating and accepting conspiracy theories as explanations for the unpleasantness of reality results in alienation from politics. Since the rules of the game are decided far and above the reach

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41 see in the first case the campaign of the newspaper “Ziua” against president Iliescu in 1994, and the campaign against president Constantinescu in “Romania Mare” in 1998.

42 Deletant D. (1995), *Ceausescu and the Securitate. Coercion and Dissent in Romania 1965-1989*, London: Hurst & Co, p. 393.

43 See for details “22”, no. 1, 4 – 10 January 2000

of mere mortals, political engagement is futile. Disengagement from politics shows an ability to avoid engaging the present and choosing to live as if the constraints of the world around do not exist. While such life philosophy might secure survival, it is neither constructive nor helpful in the process of democratization and implementation of the rule of law. In fact, within this logic, laws are treated as temporary constructions and breaking them is not seen in any way as being problematic. Within the Romanian cultural heritage, one particular myth underlies the logic of subtracting the present and inhabiting an atemporal spiritual eternity.

Treated as The national myth by literature textbooks, *“Miorita”* is seen by some scholars as the starting point for any attempt to analyse Romanian politics or history,<sup>44</sup> and by Romanian scholars as an elaborate way to blame inaction upon some genetic code that is beyond the control of current generations (see Alina Mungiu-Pippidi). *“Miorita”* tells the story of a magical lamb that warns its owner that his fellow shepherds are planning to kill him and steal his sheep. The ethnic background of the three shepherds is precisely identified: a Moldavian (the one that will be killed), a Transylvanian and a Vallachian. A big motif in the story is that there is a plan (fate, destiny, will of God) to kill. Most importantly, there is a “conspiracy.” Though warned about it, the marked shepherd chooses to spend his time waiting for his killers, playing his flute and lost in a metaphysical dialogue with nature and a philosophical discourse about death. The communion with nature and the land is an important feature of Romanian philosophy of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century (see for example Lucian Blaga) and is seen by some analysts as a partial explanation of Romania’s slow path towards modernisation.

The concrete geographical belonging of the three protagonists – a Moldavian, a Vallachian and a Transylvanian – is a direct reference to the three Romanian historical provinces. The struggle to unify these provinces has been the common bond between generations. The very first unification of the provinces in 1600 for one hundred days has been subjected to a process of mythification. The Vallachian prince responsible for the achievement, Michael the Brave, has been portrayed in history books as the first ever creator of “national unity,” which is an illustration of the process of mythification: the idea of the nation-state, not yet conceived of in 1600 and in currency only in the last two

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44 See Schopflin (1997), op.cit.

centuries, is projected onto his achievement. During communism and post-communism, national unity became an element of constitutional regulation. “Romania is a unitary, national and independent state,” stated article 2 of the Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Romania. The same article was carried over into the 1991 constitution. Preserving national unity is central to the nationalist oriented discourse (generally promoted by the extreme nationalistic party, Romania Mare but also heard around election times from more mainstream politicians). The usual claim is that the Fatherland is in danger of dismemberment, because one of its historic provinces, Transylvania, is under threat and can be lost at any time. It is in fact a permanent call for arms. Demands of rights by the ethnic Magyars are interpreted as signs of secession (especially demands for autonomy): the government is blamed, the EU is blamed, a conspiracy is constructed. Any discourse carrying even the slightest federalist connotations is denounced as being anti-patriotic and criminal towards the very existence of the country. A rhetoric constructed upon fear of losing what previous generations have achieved is bound to resonate strongly in the ears of a relatively young nation.

Generally pointed out as an example of Romanian passivity, “*Miorita*” also evinces a predilection for acceptance of fatality and “a tendency to boycott history.”<sup>45</sup> Referred to by Mircea Vulcanescu as “the Romanian dimension of existence,”<sup>46</sup> this fatalist acceptance of destiny, determined by a belief in a spiritual eternity, is translated into the political context as an acquiescence to temporal authority and recognition of the futility of resisting it. Acceptance of the present as fatality and disengagement might explain both the lack of dissent during communism as well as the relative stability of Romanian post-communism, especially by comparison to some of its neighbours. While after 1989, the Poles, the Hungarians, the Czechs went on to try and consolidate what was achieved, Romanians seemed to have preferred to play the flute and watch the world go by. Low electoral turnout, limited party membership, minimal interest in politics (seen as a dirty, almost demonic, world), dwindling political participation in general, and a comparatively embryonic civil society, render Romanians reluctant actors of history.

45 Blaga L. (1985), *Opere*, vol. 9, *Trilogia Culturală*, Bucharest: Editura Minerva, p.307.

46 Vulcanescu M. (1991), *Dimensiunea romaneasca a existentei*, Bucharest: Editura Fundatiei Culturale Romane. Published in English as M. VULCANESCU (1975), “The Romanian Dimension of Existence: A Phenomenological Sketch”, *Romanian Sources*, vol. 1, part I, pp. 5-34.

Disengagement and the ability to live outside the present do not necessarily imply a refusal to be saved. Belief in “messianic” change and quick fixes are characteristic of Eastern Europe,<sup>47</sup> and Romania is no exception. A nation left to the mercy of history, with its borders under threat by faceless enemies, is in great need of a Saviour. Buried deep down, there is an expectation of a new Messiah capable of delivering the country from its predicaments. The Saviour is a powerful archetype, as it carries a promise and resonates with the audience’s hopes for a better future. The myth of the Saviour, which is not limited to a person, is important because of the logic that supports it. Presidential campaigns and governments’ justification of their policy of pursuing EU accession have all been based upon a promise of a somewhat miraculous deliverance.

The myth of the Saviour, one of the post-communist “fantasies of salvation,” is a constant presence in the political mythology, perpetuated in time despite the change of political regimes. In twentieth-century Romania, we passed from Marshall Antonescu, through the Captain and King Michael, to the Most Beloved Leader. The omnipotent figures from which deliverance is expected achieve particular significance and are credited with quasi-divine powers. During communism, the official propaganda conferred such power on the Party Leader, the Father of the Nation, the genius of the Carpathians, the most beloved son of the nation. In post-communist Romania the scenario is similar but there is no monopoly on the role any more: each side of the political arena has its own contender (During the 1992 presidential campaign Iliescu’s supporters chanted, “Iliescu appears and the sun rises,” while in 1990, in the University Square the anti-Iliescu demonstrators intoned, “Monarchy will save Romania”).

In Romania, any political juncture is granted monumental dimensions, its description being conveyed by adjectives, connoting uniqueness: “the only,” “the sole,” “the unique” chance/train/way. In this way, a mass psychosis is created which confronts the nation with a “now or never” dilemma. Such a nation does not evolve linearly but has sporadic spasms, with dramatic and hysterical accents. Failure to take that “unique” opportunity, inflated in importance, falls back into “mioritic” fatality and fuels discourses such as “nothing can be done” until the next spasm in the face of the danger of losing “the last,” “the only,” “the

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47 Schopflin G. (1996), *Politics in Eastern Europe*, Cambridge: Blackwell.



unique” train/chance/way. The phenomenon of the “New Messiah” is a consequence of this thinking pattern. By extension, the figure of the all-powerful person also becomes “unique,” “the only,” “the ultimate.” They do not promise, they “guarantee” (e.g. see Traian Basescu’s campaign for mayor of Bucharest as well as for president). Candidates would be referred to as “the man the country needs,” “the only man,” “the only statesman/woman,” “the only one capable of saving the country from its crisis.” The destiny of presidential candidates is linked to the fate of the country, their candidature is “a candidature for the country,” “national dignity” being dependent upon their election. Whether or not these statements can be proven is irrelevant. What is important is to equip the protagonist with the necessary attributes in an almost brutal process of self-persuasion. This phenomenon reveals the immature state of Romanian society, a fascination with the image of power as “one,” and an acute inability to assume responsibility, preferring instead miraculous solutions. There is also no dimension of relativity: if it is good, it is very good, if it is bad, it is extraordinarily bad. The choice is always between paradise and hell. As a result of the inability to look for the middle ground, Romanian post-communist politics has been characterised by fragmentation, dysfunctional coalitions, and continuous rearrangements of parties. By continuing to think in absolute terms, Romanian political actors show that they have not yet learnt the value of compromise, characteristic of a representative democracy.

The “Saviour” does not have to be a person or just “one” person. The debates about the nature of the 1989 events (a revolution or just a coup d’etat?) have been a feature of the Romanian post-communist era. Both sides of the political arena have elected in their public speeches to talk about a ‘revolution’. Apart from the romantic ring of the word, there were also political advantages to be gained from such a choice (e.g. an important element of legitimacy for the neo-communist regime). The discourse is full of praise for the young generation (“those beautiful youngsters”) or for the Romanian people in general. The underlying idea demonstrates the same belief in miraculous change (“the December miracle,” as it is often called), attributing extraordinary powers to the saviour. This time, however, the saviour is the collective not the individual. The collective regarded as “one.”

The Saviour does not have a national colour. A Saviour can come from the outside and can be an idea rather than a person. Of the discursive narrative to emerge post-1989, the most powerful one is the

one around “Europe” and the prospect of European integration. The discourse around “Europe” builds on the promise of a better future and the arrival of a Golden Era, while “Europe” is personified and referred to as a saviour. “Entering Europe” and EU membership have been and are equated with the arrival of foreign investment, the opening of Western markets, an increase in the standard of living as well as incorporation into the Western security system. Thus, “Europe” would save Romanians from themselves by finally acknowledging the European character of their national identity and by forcing their governments to uphold the rule of law, guarantee the rights of its citizens, regardless of ethnic background, implement anti-corruption strategies, and teach them efficient governance.

## **Conclusion**

An analysis of the main Romanian cultural myths of origin shows that they contain frames of all four fundamental myths: unity, the saviour, conspiracy theory and the Golden Age. As such, they allow the political myths employing these frames to echo in the collective memory. Hence, political myths are not new inventions. They use frames already developed and established within a nation’s collective memory by cultural myths. By exploiting the patterns set by one nation’s cultural myths, political myths travel in time. The script of the narrative does not change; the protagonists do. The analysis of cultural foundational myths provides further understanding of the evolutions and devolutions of post-communism by explaining why certain political myths have acquired relevance and have been successful in attracting public support. In stressing out the importance of myths, this article does not suggest that nations are imprisoned within a symbolic universe from which there is no escape. Myths are powerful creations. Properly used, they may stir up passions and feelings. They may be constructive as well as destructive. While their analysis is useful for political research, within the public arena it would be dangerous to use a nation’s symbolic heritage as a justification for its shortcomings, as this would induce fatality rather than action.