

## REVIVING MOLDOVA: SOCIAL AND POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF CONTEMPORARY FOLKLORIC PERFORMANCES

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On any given day, casual visitors and long-term residents alike will easily encounter “folkloric” music and dance in Moldova’s capital city of Chişinău. Whether you go to a restaurant, turn on the television or radio, attend a concert at the National Palace, take a stroll past the stages erected in the main square for free public performances during any major holiday, participate in a celebration hosted by a local company or union for its workers, or attend an elementary-school function, chances are you will witness dances like the *horă* and *bătută*, or the singing of a *doină*. [1] Folkloric forms of music and dance are by no means the only genres available in the Republic of Moldova, and folk performers jostle for public attention with locally and internationally produced pop-rock, opera, classical music, ballet, ballroom dancing, and jazz dance. Each genre has its devotees, and pop-rock especially dominates the airwaves here, as elsewhere. This diversity in available music and dance styles makes it difficult to assign a particular social importance to the folk genres in Moldova. Yet that is exactly what I propose to do in this article.

In keeping with the general theme of this issue of *The Anthropology of East Europe Review*, this article [2] has three broad goals. First, it introduces the basic criteria that distinguish folk music and dance from other locally available styles, and provides a general guide to the finer distinctions that local specialists make regarding subtypes of folkloric performance and authenticity. Second, it places folk music and dance within Moldova’s recent social history, especially emphasizing issues related to state sovereignty, national identity, and ethnic relations. Third, it examines a particular question—when is folkloric performance political?—in the context of my own research with members of the self-described “folkloric movement” in Moldova.

As an American anthropologist, I find the claims that members of this movement make regarding the apolitical and antipolitical nature of their work very challenging; therefore this article demonstrates several ways in which I have tried to ascertain what it means for folkloric music and dance in Moldova to be or not be “political.” Taken together, I hope the three foci of this article provide a useful introduction to folkloric performance in Moldova that also speaks more broadly to the centrality of music and dance in the social life, ethnographic study, and general understanding of post-socialist Eastern Europe.

### Folk Music and Dance in the Republic of Moldova

For an American, the prominence of folkloric performances in everyday life in Moldova stands out as a significant “social fact” worth further investigation. The most general criteria will distinguish folkloric performance for the least knowledgeable of observers. First, folkloric performers wear distinctive costumes. In Moldova, as might be expected, classical orchestras perform in tuxedos and black dresses, ballet dancers wear tutus and tights, opera singers wear evening dresses and character costumes, and pop-rock musicians perform in street clothes, veering towards evening and party-wear. In Moldova, people commonly scrutinize costumes as an indicator of the relative authenticity of a folkloric performance, but commonalities across folkloric costuming make the genre identifiable even for a relatively uninformed newcomer.

Folk musicians and dancers can usually be distinguished by the embroidered white shirts worn by both men and women. Other costume pieces convey varying commitments to authenticity among performers. The women’s shirts are slightly flounced at the shoulders, scoop-necked, and have embroidery descending in vertical rows down the front of the chest as well as the length of the sleeve, and are worn tucked into a darker-colored skirt of any number of styles. Handloomed, long, narrow, wrap-around skirts, especially black or dark blue, interspersed with vertical lines of dark red and blue, are considered the most “authentic.” The most “inauthentic” skirts are circle-skirts cut to the knee or even above, decorated with large, bright patterns of sunflowers, grapes, or geometric motifs usually found in locally woven carpets. Men’s shirts fall below their hips. They have subtler embroidery, usually limited to the neck and chest area, and in the most “authentic” costuming are worn belted over white pants. Less authentic costuming for men involves black pants. Other articles of clothing frequently worn during folkloric performances—including sheerling vests and pig-skin moccasins for men and women, and black lambskin capes and sheepskin hats for men—further help a casual viewer or listener to identify “folklore” by sight alone. Ordinary citizens no longer wear these “national costumes,” and they are usually publicly displayed only in museums and during performances of folk music and dance (see also Worldmark Encyclopedia 1998:254).

Distinctive instrumentation, rhythms, lyrics, and steps further define folkloric music and dance in Moldova. While local ethnographers, folklorists, and performers spend their professional lives learning to identify and reproduce these distinctive elements, a non-specialist will also quickly perceive certain patterns. [3] For example, combinations of violin, clarinet, double bass, and xylophone dominate folk music; alternatively, flutes and ocarinas appear together. Rhythms from the first combination of instruments tend to be fast, their phrases repeat, and the overall effect is of a rollicking, slightly jazzy, exuberant and accented rhythm; the second set of combinations yields music that inevitably starts slow and plaintive, and often stays that way, although it too tends to get faster. Music of the first type often accompanies dancing, but singing (except in “shouts” done while dancing) is performed by unaccompanied soloists. Singers deliver obviously ironic commentaries or plaintive, reflective melodies. Dancing usually involves equal numbers of men and women, and though they may sometimes break into pairs, the tendency is toward round-dances. A lead dancer frequently shouts to the others, and they respond. Like the music, dances tend to start out slow, and get increasingly faster. Their rhythm is simple, but insistent, and—as locals like to say—it has *temperament*.

To an outsider, Moldova’s folklore signals the existence of a distinct local aesthetic system. Folklore’s public visibility further suggests that these aesthetic values are not simply elements of a forgotten past. Instead, performers and consumers of folklore are busily confronting and re-confronting the past and the values they associate with it every time they engage with a folkloric performance. But what are the actual mechanics involved in these confrontations with the past? Who performs and consumes folklore, and why? What is the social meaning of folklore in Moldova?

During 2001, I conducted nine months of fieldwork in the Republic of Moldova, building on three months of preliminary research undertaken between 1999 and 2000. I worked with local ethnographers, folklorists, performers, teachers, ensemble directors, ministry officials, and a host of other specialists to learn how the repertoires of children’s folkloric ensembles were created, performed, and judged. I wanted to know, first and foremost, whether traditional materials from each of the country’s several ethnic groups entered ensemble repertoires. Or, did these repertoires systematically include only one or a few group’s traditions, while excluding those from other groups? The overarching goal was to study the changing shape of national identity and ethnic relations in the context of post-socialism and new state-building initiatives. Following the existing literature on nationalism, folkloric performances suggested themselves as a potentially significant platform for launching representations of “national”

culture and identity into the public sphere (Gellner 1983; Herzfeld 1987; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Shay 2002; Smith 1991). I wanted to know whether specialists used their creative work, especially their pedagogical work with children, to support the government’s recent attempts to promote Moldova’s identity as a “multi-ethnic” state.

On their part, the specialists I worked with took great pains to teach me how to distinguish “authentic” folklore from its “inauthentic” representations. My informants accepted me as an “ethnographer,” but found it difficult to teach me to recognize, classify, and distinguish the many sub-categories of folklore in the same ways that they do. I have no specialized training in music or dance, and was largely innocent of most local customs and traditions before I saw them performed on-stage. As a primary research method, “participant-observation” led me into a study of the debates between specialists about “authenticity” long before I had many experiences of my own that my informants would recognize as “authentic.” Specifically, I did not know the traditions of local villages through personal experience. My response to this predicament in cultural translation is to show how the problem of defining folklore as a performance genre reflects and encapsulates key features of local social systems and experiences. Specifically, Moldova’s folkloric genres reflect the country’s Soviet legacy and its place in a broader East European culture area.

### Soviet Legacies

The most significant legacy of Soviet rule in Moldova relates to the question of national identity. In fact, at least five over-lapping questions regarding the ideal connections between culture and politics continue to dominate political discussions both locally and internationally. 1) Should Moldova exist as an independent country? 2) Should Moldova unite with Romania? 3) Is the majority of the population “Romanian”? 4) Is there a “Moldovan” identity that is not simply “Romanian”? 5) Should the state’s boundaries and/or local structures of governance be changed to better represent ethnic, regional, or other interests? On the one hand, these questions represent the general dilemmas faced by any nationalizing state (Brubaker 1996). The debate over the distinctiveness of “Moldovan” identity, however, is rooted in divergent interpretations of key historical and demographic facts.

The Republic of Moldova gained independence as the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, maintaining political boundaries first established in 1940. In 1940, the Soviet Union gained control of Bessarabia from Romania as part of the agreements outlined in the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. By joining Bessarabia’s six counties with six counties already formed in the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet

Socialist Republic (MASSR), the Soviet Union formed a new political unit: the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) (King 2000:94). The MSSR and today's Republic of Moldova united two pieces of land—Bessarabia and Transnistria—that had never before been administered as a single political unit. Bessarabia, which stretches between the Prut and Dneister Rivers, was part of the medieval principality of Moldova that became a vassal state of the Ottoman Empire in the 1500s. In 1812, The Ottoman Empire ceded Bessarabia, but not the rest of Moldova (which would later become part of modern Romania), to the Russian empire where it maintained some political autonomy as a *guberniia*. In 1917, Bessarabia united with the Kingdom of Romania, and the Soviet Union disputed the legitimacy of this union throughout the inter-war period. The other part of the Republic of Moldova, currently referred to as Transnistria because it lies on the eastern bank of the Dneister River, had no political identity separate from Ukraine until 1924 when the Soviet Union carved 7,516 square kilometers out of the Ukrainian SSR to form the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (King 2000:52). When Transnistria's six counties were combined with Bessarabia in 1940, the rest of the MASSR was dissolved into Ukraine. Because Moldova's borders have changed so often, and because the borders set in 1924 and 1940 so clearly manipulated local politics in favor of Soviet interests (see Bruchis 1984 for a detailed account), the state itself often seems illegitimate.

Since 1991, the legitimacy of post-Soviet Moldova's borders has been heavily questioned in word and deed. Strong pro-Romanian sentiments in the early 1990s caused international observers to expect Moldova to re-unify with Romania. At the same time, local fears of unification with Romania helped spark two violent conflicts. In a development that Kaufman (1996) refers to as "spiraling," fearful masses in Transnistria and among the Gagauz in the south began to support a few political elites who were primarily concerned with "outbidding" each other for power. To leverage an advantage over their opponents, these elites played on ethnically localized fears of language extinction, political domination, and—especially—job prospects for individuals who did not speak the official language. In 1990, the central government in Chişinău, dominated by members of the Popular Front, sent armed volunteers into Transnistria and among the Gagauz to quell separatist activity, resulting in violent conflicts in the two regions between 1990 and 1992. The conflict with the Gagauz was officially resolved in 1994 by creating a semi-autonomous region, Gagauz Yeri, that has the right to secede if Moldova's borders change. The conflict with Transnistria, however, has not been resolved. In 1996 it declared itself a sovereign and independent republic, and since then the Dneister Republic has functioned as an independent

but unrecognized state. Recent attempts to reintegrate Transnistria have focused on the possibility of federalizing Moldova. While the international community clearly supports this initiative, it is difficult to gauge public support for any changes in the state's basic form or function.

Debates over Moldova's national identity also focus on the topic of ethnicity. The primary question in these debates is whether Moldova's population consists of a majority of "Romanians." Moldova is clearly a multi-ethnic state. The last census conducted in Moldova in 1989, reveals that the population of just under 4.5 million is 64.5% Moldovan, 13.8% Ukrainian, 13.0% Russian, 3.5% Gagauz, 2.0% Jewish, 1.5% Bulgarian, and 1.7% other (Encyclopedia Britannica 1997:670). The majority of the population (nearly 2/3) has long been identified as "Moldovan." [4] The category refers primarily to language (as reflected by the census), but also references a regional and rural identity rooted in the history of the medieval Moldovan state, and is considered distinct from the more "modern" and "urban" dimensions of Romanian national identity. Soviet language and nationalities policies capitalized on the pre-existing and local sense of distinctiveness to "create" a Moldovan language and nation that legitimated Bessarabia's 1940 annexation (King 1995). Since the Moldovan and Romanian languages are now widely recognized as identical (Dyer 1996), however, it is not clear whether Moldova's majority is best described as "Romanian," "Moldovan," or something else. Since the 1980s, Moldova's citizenry has been exploring the potential political and social effects of acknowledging the linguistic, cultural, and historical affinities of "Moldovans" with "Romanians." Legislation enacted by successive governments reflects these explorations: there have been ongoing changes in the naming of official and state languages—not only should "Romanian" be locally referred to as "Moldovan," but what status it should have, and what status Russian should have—as well as regular shifts in the country's relationship to Romania, and Moldova's willingness to engage in cultural and educational exchanges.

In many respects, the Republic of Moldova can be considered a "second Romanian state" (Gondek 1997). But as pro-Romanian sentiments and interest in unification have faded over the past decade, international observers have wondered if Romanian-speakers and other ethnic groups in Moldova actually share a common identity that has yet to be articulated. Survey research conducted immediately after independence indicates that members of Moldova's ethnic groups do share many common political aspirations that citizens of Romania do not share (Crowther 1991, 1997, 1998). This little researched question about the commonalities between Moldova's ethnic groups helped draw me to the study of folkloric performance as a form of cultural education.

Regardless of whether one judges a state's legitimacy on historical or ethnic criteria, Moldova's claim to its current territory and citizens is inherently weak. This seeming mismatch between nation and state is an immediate consequence of the Soviet Union's system of distributing power along ethnic lines, and more particularly, by doing so unevenly (Suny 1995). Soviet nationalities policies divided peoples along ethnic (usually linguistic) lines into "nations," "nationalities," "ethnic groups," "ethnic minorities." The categories reflect real differences in population size (nations have a minimum of 80,000–100,000 members, while the other groups have smaller populations) (Simon 1991:14). These divisions initially helped bring conceptual order into the tremendous diversity of languages, religions, cultural practices, and historical experiences exhibited by the Soviet Union's population (Hirsch 1997). Yet these categories were also used to distribute political power and cultural rights to national groups through the administrative divisions of union republics, autonomous republics, oblasts, and okrugs. Each administrative division functioned something like a "nation-state" for a particular nationality (the "titular nationality"); local administrative organs were supposed to help the titular nationality develop a Soviet and socialist identity, and thus supported the development of "national" cadres through such activities as native language education, scholarship, and publishing. Moldovans were the titular nationality in the MSSR, and Romanian-speakers now prefer to imagine independent Moldova as essentially a "Romanian" state. For their part, other ethnic groups resist the "Romanianization" of the state and are even unwilling to be defined as "minorities" because this term, in its Soviet usage, implies that they lack the right to self-definition (Socor 1994:23). Since Moldova has maintained its independence despite the weakness of its national identity, one might expect to find a variety of nation-building projects being initiated. In particular, one might expect to find the state encouraging projects to build a multi-ethnic national identity in accord with its official policy orientations to support multi-ethnicity (see King 2000:170; Neukirch 1999:52–53).

### Soviet Legacies in Folkloric Performance

In approaching folkloric ensembles and their performances from the vantage point of Moldova's national politics, I initially asked questions related to the process of identity formation. I asked about how folkloric ensembles resolve the question of "Moldovan" national identity. Are the "Moldovans" portrayed on-stage Romanians only, or do they fully represent the multi-ethnic citizenry of the new state? I saw the directors of folkloric ensembles as an example of the intellectuals who figure so prominently in the literature on nationalism. Their work in teaching

traditions to children struck me as an example of the processes involved in "imagining" a nation (Anderson 1996), elaborating an "ethnic core" into a nation (Smith 1991), or cultivating "wild" culture into national ("garden") varieties (Gellner 1983:50–52).

In another article (Cash 2002), I describe how ensemble directors presented their work to me. Early in my fieldwork, I was encouraged to work with *folcloric* and *etno-folcloric* ensembles which are considered especially "authentic;" I was discouraged from working with *popular* ensembles. [5] From an American perspective, each of these ensemble types performs folklore, but from the perspective of specialists in Moldova, the differing degrees of authenticity manifest by each ensemble type carry political significance. As my informants explained, *popular* ensembles existed throughout the Soviet era, and were in fact, a medium for disseminating Soviet ideologies and propaganda. From their perspective, the stylized "folklore" contained in the costumes, repertoires, and stage styles of *popular* ensembles is decidedly inauthentic because it is largely composed and designed to promote political messages about inter-ethnic friendship. In contrast, I was told that *folcloric* and *etno-folcloric* ensembles had both emerged in the 1980s as part of a "folkloric movement" that coincided with the national movement, and sought to uncover, document, and publicly reveal the variety and richness of local customs and culture that had been "covered up" by Soviet practices. Today, these two types of "authentic" ensembles continue to distinguish themselves from *popular* ensembles on the basis of how repertoires are created and performed. They also claim to perform "national" folklore without political messages.

When a self-consciously authentic ensemble performs, it seeks to re-create the whole of village life. The stringent standards for authenticity established by the folkloric movement insist that ensembles collect their repertoires from one or a few villages. Costumes should also come from these villages when at all possible, although "good" reproductions are also acceptable. In the strictest interpretations of authenticity, songs and dances are performed as part of a dramatization of the ritual or event in which they would "naturally" occur. Thus, instead of merely performing a series of individualized songs and dances, an authentic ensemble re-enacts a wedding, village dance party, children's games, New Year's caroling, or one of many rites and rituals defined and studied by professional folklorists and ethnographers. Because they re-create villages instead of portraying ethnic groups, authentic ensembles claim that they present non-political representations of national culture and identity.

Although strict, the guidelines for authenticity present a number of problems for actual performances. For example, how do you adequately condense a three-day wedding

celebration for a twenty-minute stage presentation? Should costumes be standardized for the whole ensemble, or should they reflect the individuality or socio-economic differences found among real villagers? Should children be limited to performing as children, or can they take on adult roles? What are the limits of acceptability in placing rituals on-stage? For example, can a mother's funerary lamentations be performed, or are they significantly more "private" than lullabies or weddings? Despite the sometimes heated debates among specialists over the best ways to implement the generally-agreed upon standards for authenticity, *folcloric* and *etno-folcloric* ensembles succeed in transmitting to their audiences a definition of culture as the property and product of villages.

The standards for authenticity in folkloric performances do not fully succeed, however, in removing commentaries on ethnic qualities and relations from the stage. Instead, actual collecting practices, and the fixed associations of "authentic" culture with rural areas minimally influenced by industrialization or trade serve to limit the number of ethnic groups that can meet the supposedly neutral performance criteria. For example, Moldova's Russian and Jewish populations have historically lived in cities: by definition then, they seem to have no authentic traditions. The Gagauz on the other hand, do live in villages, but particular aspects of their clothing and customs mark any claims they advance to having "authentic" culture as suspect: local specialists pointed out to me, for example, that even the oldest examples of clothing from Gagauz villages are made from manufactured cloth and mimics more "urban" styles. These same specialists also emphasized that almost all Gagauz traditions are so similar to Romanian traditions that they seem to be borrowings or translations. As a result of these standards, "authentic" folklore in Moldova corresponds very nearly with the folklore of Romanian-speakers, and—when performed on stage—promotes a vision of Moldova as being culturally Romanian. [6] Thus, folkloric performances advance an argument about national identity that supports the politics of pro-Romanianism, even when claiming political neutrality.

### Political Dimensions of Folklore

Between my original research question and my informants' description of their success in over-turning the politicization of folklore, lurks an important question. Can we say with any concreteness whether and how folkloric performances are "political"? In addition to the literature on nationalism that regularly cites the political functions of folklore (see above), recent reviews of research on dance (Reed 1998) and cultural production more generally (Mahon 2000) indicate an intense interest on the part of anthropologists in linking performance and media

to questions of power. In case after case, the history of a particular dance or other performance style reveals local patterns of power and protest, resistance and complicity, and moments in which these patterns are reproduced or effectively transformed. Several key works especially link dance with the politics of nationalism by focusing on the role of state institutions and ideologies in the creation of "national" dance forms (Reed 1998:511). While these works validate my own approach in the short run, they also provide the grounds for a general critique of our common assumptions about the "political" aspects of music, dance, and other performative genres. Reed and Mahon, for example, urge further study of audience reception and spectatorship, noting that most research has tended to over-focus on performers and the creation of performed products. In other words, how "political" is a performance that is not perceived as such by its audience?

Case studies of music and dance in Eastern Europe since the 1980s also point to the limits of usefulness provided by existing paradigms for researching the connections between performance and politics. Maners (1995), for example, discovers the limited utility of equating "politics" with state interest and investment in the arts. He finds that by 1987 when he began his fieldwork in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the socialist state in Yugoslavia had influenced the social context of creating, performing, and observing dance to such an extent that folkloric dances are thoroughly politicized regardless of their actual ideological content. He therefore suggests turning away from an explicit question of the "political" nature of dance, and instead extending Appadurai's (1986, cited in Maners) notion of the "social life of things" to dances. With this approach, Maners examines how folkloric dances in Bosnia-Herzegovina become commodified, and then—as commodities—have "social lives." Maners applies a broad definition of commodification that would certainly apply to Moldova, and it is tempting to pursue his analytical lead. I will not do so, however, for two reasons. First, I began my research with an explicit interest in the state, and thus organized my research to investigate the institutionalized "chains of command" linking the state to folkloric ensembles. Consequently, my data lends itself to a "producer-centered" analysis. Second, I want to fully engage with my informants' own presentation of their professional activities. My informants tend to insist that "authentic" folkloric performances are "pure" cultural products, free of social, political, and economic taints or constraints. Since they themselves frame their activities in opposition to "political" and "politicized" forms of dance and music, I think it is important to understand what such assertions mean, and why they "make sense" in post-socialist society.

When folklorists, ethnographers, and performers in Moldova claim to be apolitical, and even anti-politi-

cal, they point to broader changes in the roles of art and culture, and of artists and intellectuals, in post-Socialist Eastern Europe. The claims my informants make regarding the apolitical nature of “authentic” folklore can best be understood by remembering that intellectuals and artists—producers of culture—were assigned a special role in the development of socialist societies in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. At a minimum, artistic work was supposed to convey the socialist values articulated by the Communist Party to the masses. As an educational and ideological tool of the party, art and artists were subject to censorship by political authorities. By the same token, culture producers were assumed to command political authority, attention, and power.

Some authors (e.g., Konrád and Szelényi 1979) even suggest that the relationship between the state and intellectuals that one expects in capitalist societies was reversed under socialism. Instead of the “intellectual” being defined in opposition to the state, and living “outside” state influence and power, intellectuals were, in fact, in charge of the socialist state. Miklós Haraszti (1987) argues that artists too, were at the “heart of power” in socialist Eastern Europe. Under socialism, “intellectual activity and the structure of the state were like muscles and bones in an indivisible, organic unity” (Haraszti 1987:18). Art, he argues, is not necessarily an expression of freedom; it can exist and flourish under authoritarian systems, as revealed by the activities of “state artists” in socialist countries. Not only did these artists become complicit in their own censorship, but they were also social planners. Haraszti’s description of artists and intellectuals during the last years of state socialism suggests a complete politicization of society.

In the socialist context, we are told that it is absurd to try to distinguish levels of individual or collective political activity; even art belonged to the state and created the state. Accounts of the “Song to Romania” festival which had a large percentage of folkloric performances provide a good illustration of how (to date) scholars have had little success teasing out patterns of political resistance in socialist-era performances (Giurchescu 1987; Radulescu 1997); by and large, they can only identify patterns of complicity. Indeed, Kürti (2001) demonstrates how the Hungarian state and its institutions sought to incorporate the folkloric *táncház* (dance-house) movement in the mid-1970s, dampening its potential as a vehicle for political opposition merely by making it a state-supported activity. Perhaps ironically, the *táncház* cultural agenda eventually impacted Hungary’s relations with Romania and other communist states, but the basic pattern of the state’s political structures absorbing, containing, and controlling performance holds in Kürti’s analysis of life in socialist Hungary as well. In other words, for their analyses of the

political dimensions of performance to be meaningful, scholars of music and dance in Eastern Europe must first ask: when is cultural production *not* under state control?

“Authentic” folkloric performances in Moldova initially suggest one of these zones outside the control of the socialist state. Members of Moldova’s folkloric movement see their professional work as a rejection of the Soviet insistence that artistic and cultural works should serve to develop socialist values. They reject at least some of the specifically Soviet models of fusing culture with politics. The recent focus on creating authentic folkloric ensembles, and festivals and competitions in which they compete, is certainly a reactionary discourse. But how do we understand it? Have Moldova’s “authentic” folkloric ensembles really succeeded in breaking the connection between performance and politics?

I attempt to answer these questions by approaching the political dimensions of contemporary folklore in Moldova from several directions. First, I examine the institutional organization of folkloric ensembles relative to the state. This approach asks what degree of control the state has over folkloric ensembles and their activities. Second, I consider the political implications of genre. In other words, how are folkloric performance genres defined in relation to other performance genres, and can their activities be tracked or standardized by the state? Third, I ask about the relation between performers and their audiences. Specifically, are audiences able to accurately gauge the political intentions of folkloric performances? Each of these three approaches reveals that “authentic” folklore is a specialist’s domain. Without substantial knowledge concerning the criteria for authenticity, the ethnographic commitment and experience of individual ensemble directors, and the motivations for an ensemble’s appearance at a particular event, audiences lose the ability to decipher the full political intent of a folkloric ensemble’s performance. Thus in the end, we must ask whether the performers’ intent really matters in assigning political and social significance to performances of folkloric music and dance.

### Organization of Arts and Culture in the (Post)-Soviet State

The majority of performers and performance ensembles in Moldova, including folklore, are institutionally organized, overseen, and financed by the Ministry of Culture. Performers are divided into amateurs and professionals. This division does not correspond exactly with an age-level division between children and adults; therefore from the very outset my specific interest in children’s ensembles requires a conceptual re-organization of performance activities relative to the state. Specifically, the Ministry of Culture oversees both professional and amateur per-

formance activity, but the Ministry of Education is also involved in the performance activities of children. Thus all the children's folkloric ensembles I studied were organized by one of these two ministries. A few children's ensembles are sponsored by private businesses, mainly for employees' children. During the Soviet period, these ensembles were ultimately under state supervision, but since privatization, this is no longer true. There are also a handful of children's ensembles operating out of privately owned dance companies, and a very few professional folkloric performers have significant opportunities for employment outside of the state sector. For the most part, however, folkloric performers rely on state infrastructure and funding for their continued existence. Thus although none of my informants recounted recent examples of overt censorship or artistic direction in their professional activities from ministry staff, the potential for top-down direction, even in repertoire creation, remains as a powerful Soviet legacy.

The local and national governments are organized as parallel structures, so that each *județ* (county) has organs analogous to those of the national government. Instead of a ministry of culture, each county has a department of culture; instead of a ministry of education, it has a department of education; and so on. At the same time, there is a high degree of administrative centralization and top-down management. That is, all local government and administrative organs are also supervised by the national government. In accord with governmental structure and electoral procedures, even local culture houses, schools, and their employees may ultimately be affected by the ideological orientation of the majority party.

The Ministry of Culture organizes children's ensembles through its art schools and culture houses. Local administrations have departments of culture, which are directly responsible for the culture houses as well as local libraries. The local departments of culture are overseen by both the Ministry of Culture and the local administration. The Ministry of Education organizes children's ensembles through schools and the former Pioneer houses (now called "creative centers"), of which there are forty in the country along with a National Palace of Creativity. Whether organized within the systems administered by the Ministry of Culture or the Ministry of Education, individual folkloric ensembles have a similar relation to the state, as well as local government. The major difference is that the Ministry of Education's National Palace of Creativity (which sponsors folkloric groups) has no direct equivalent within the Ministry of Culture. The National Center for Folk Creation (*Centru Național de Creație Populară*), primarily sustains adult activities, and does not sponsor any ensembles. It has organizational connections to children's ensembles only through the adults who work with children, and in this capacity the center offers

seminars, workshops, and is a general source of expertise on the folkarts in Moldova (see fig. 1 next page).

### Politics of Genre

What the above description and accompanying diagrams should demonstrate is that folkloric performance is organized and sustained at a number of points in Moldovan society. The majority is through state institutions. Folkloric genres abound in children's extra-curricular activities, but the state supports them primarily as performative, not ideological, experiences. The state lacks definitions and other criteria with which to control folklore, except as a generalized performance genre. Otherwise, the development of repertoires, criteria for performance, and structure of the relationship between performers and audience, depends on the working relationships established between ensemble directors and the "experts" in the national organizations. For students of the Soviet Union, the lack of overt politics and ideology in Moldova's performing arts may come as a surprise. In fact, this factor supports the argument advanced by local specialists that the "folkloric movement" of the 1980s, and the recent creation of *folcloric* and *etno-folcloric* ensembles, has effectively de-ideologized folklore.

All told, the Ministry of Culture estimates that in the year 2000, 1,479 performance groups existed for children, and that some 20,000 children participated in these groups (table 1). The director of the National Center for Folk Creation estimates that each *județ* has at least 300 ensembles (Paladi 2001). This figure, which includes adults' and children's ensembles of all genres, means that nearly 3,300 performance groups are active in a country with a population of some 4 million people. Out of 1,479 children's groups, how many were folkloric ensembles?

**Table 1.** Children's Artistic Formations, All Genres

County	Total Number of Groups	Total Participants
Taraclia	58	866
Bălți	274	3,715
Edineț	210	2,835
Soroca	136	1,457
Chișinău	101	2,116
Ungheni	102	1,184
Orhei	173	2,281
Lăpușna	165	2,072
Tighina	75	668
Cahul	65	816
UTA Găgăuzia	53	859
City of Chișinău	67	1,140
<b>Totals</b>	<b>1,479</b>	<b>20,009</b>

Figures compiled by V. Melnic, June 2001.

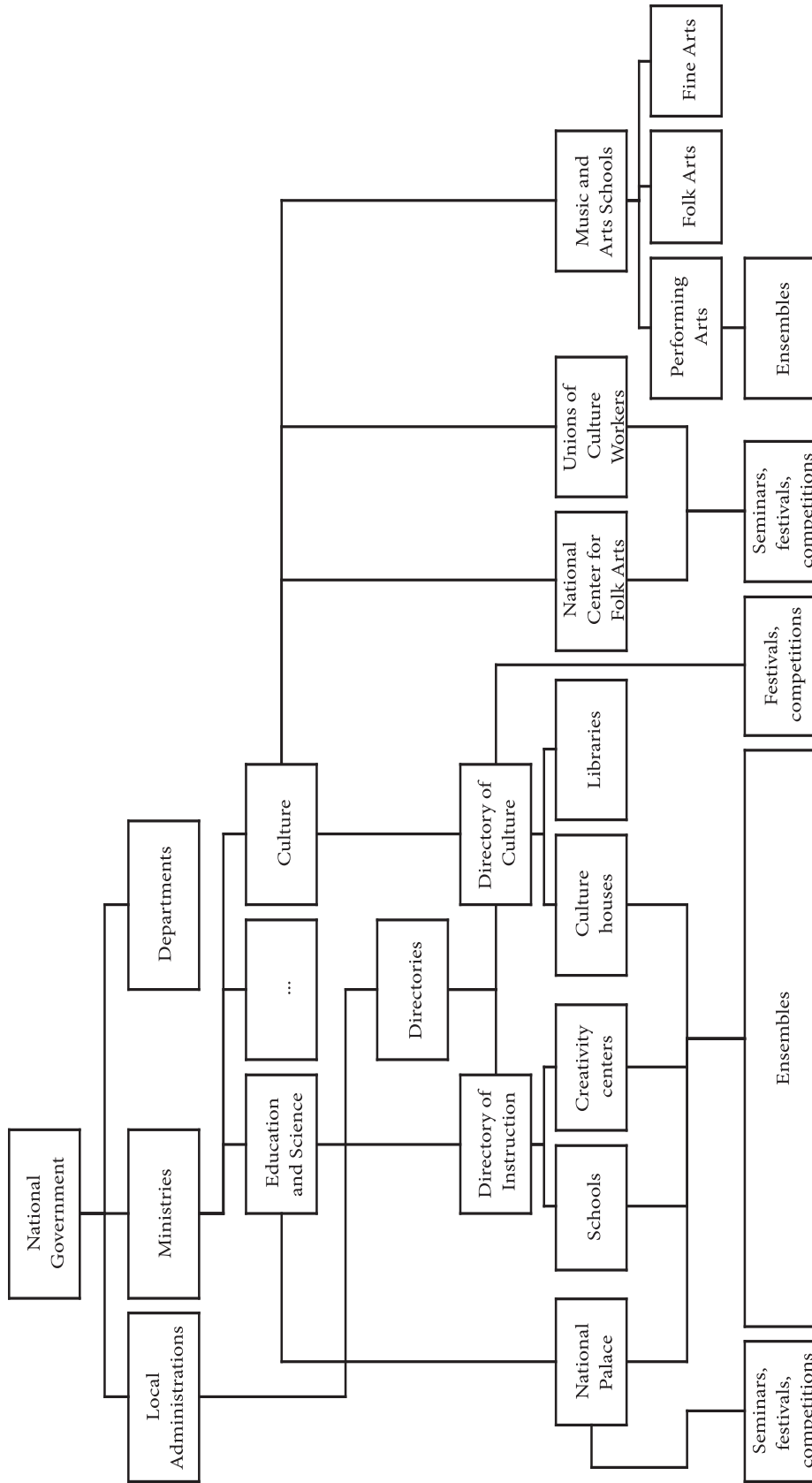


Figure 1. Organization of Folkloric Ensembles through the Ministries of Culture and Education

The data are not available, but officials at the Ministry of Culture claim that the majority of these groups have a folklorically-oriented repertoire.

These data include eleven types of “artistic formation.” The five most frequently represented are *folcloric* and *etno-folcloric* formations, *fanfare* (marching or brass bands), *popular* music orchestras, *popular* dance groups, and choirs. Only choirs are not usually considered “folkloric” groups. [7] The remaining ensemble types are folkloric theater, *popular* theater, youth theater, puppet theater, ballroom dancing, and “light” (pop-rock) music ensembles (fig. 2).

As these data indicate, there are many varieties of folklore being taught to and performed by children in Moldova, but the varieties are not rigorously defined or tracked by the state. What is important (to the state) is the number of performing groups and performers, not the genres performed. The geographical-administrative distribution of performance is also recorded. It is not possible to get separate figures for the number of ensembles organized within the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education. Nor is it possible to calculate the predominance of “ethnic” ensembles either by the ethnic composition of individuals in performing groups, the languages used in instruction, or the ethnic-provenance of the repertoire.

The above data from the Ministry of Culture were evidently collected to document the relative development of amateur arts in relation to professional arts. Genre categories are implicitly known, but do not appear as separate statistics. The categories reveal that music, dance, and theater are considered distinct performance categories, so more specific genres are defined first by how they combine music, dance, and drama. Secondly, genres are defined by their relative reliance on “folk,” “modern,” or “universal” repertoires. Again, I was unable to obtain official definitions for these categories. Since the state’s official categories fail to comprehensively delineate the characteristics of each genre, specialists rely on their “common knowledge” to further record, categorize, identify, and count individual performers and performance groups. Included in this common knowledge is that the “folk” genres dominate amateur performance, although no official and overarching category of “folk” performance exists to facilitate the actual documentation of these genres. Yet another problem of officially identifying and counting “folk” performers arises from the fact that the generally recognized sub-genres of folkloric performance—*folcloric*, *etno-folcloric*, and *popular*—span the meanings of folk, ethnic, popular, mass, and national.

As with *narodnyi* (national) theater in Soviet Russia, folkloric ensembles in Moldova can be variously conceived as an amateur activity, or as promoters of national culture. For example, in writing about amateur theater in the first decades of the Soviet Union, Lynn Mally (2000) recounts

the debate over the Russian adjective to be used as a description of non-professional theater. She also recounts that *narodnyi* became increasingly used after the 1930s, but that it carried in it a debate over how “national” the repertoire of an amateur theater should be. Was “national” theater to stick to a national (i.e., not Russian) language, to folkloric motifs, to works written by “national” playwrights, or to some other criteria? Mally’s research focuses on amateur theater in Russia, not in the national republics. Nevertheless, the categories of theater named above suggest the presence of a similar debate in Moldova: we find *popular* (i.e., folkloric or mass or amateur) theater, as well as *folcloric* and “youth.” Indeed, a contact at the Ministry of Education explained that a drama group described as doing *teatru popular* may be doing ordinary drama (as amateurs, therefore *popular*) or they may be doing folk theater (i.e., traditional forms of oratory and dramatic events linked to specific holidays). Although specialists know these differences exist, they are not recorded in statistical data, making it difficult to discern how many “folk” theaters actually exist. Ministry and other state officials can only arrive at relative calculations of folkloric activity if they have direct knowledge of the actual repertoires and styles of many performers. The implicit knowledge shared by performers and officials regarding meaningful ways to classify folklore as well as how to navigate the state’s official categories for performing arts reflects several decades of ongoing “political” negotiations.

### Reviving Moldova (The Folkloric Movement and Festivals)

The specialists I interacted with most often, however, repeatedly called my attention to the victory over politics represented by the system of festivals and competitions established by the “folkloric movement” of the past twenty years. As table 2 (pages 71–72) shows, multiple folkloric festivals and competitions have been started during the past twenty, and especially thirteen, years. *Popular* ensembles rarely participate in these events because the judging rewards authenticity, leaving a performance venue open exclusively for self-consciously “authentic” performances of folklore. The careful collecting activities of local ethnographers and folklorists enable Moldova’s villages to come to life on stage, depicting an idealized range of ritual activities, traditional practices, and local forms of dance and music that are not (or were not) entangled with and tainted by socialist ideology and state power structures. The existence of this festival system is taken as evidence that culture has been successfully freed from ideology and politics. This is so despite the fact that the festivals themselves, along with the participants and judges, are still heavily organized and supported by the state.

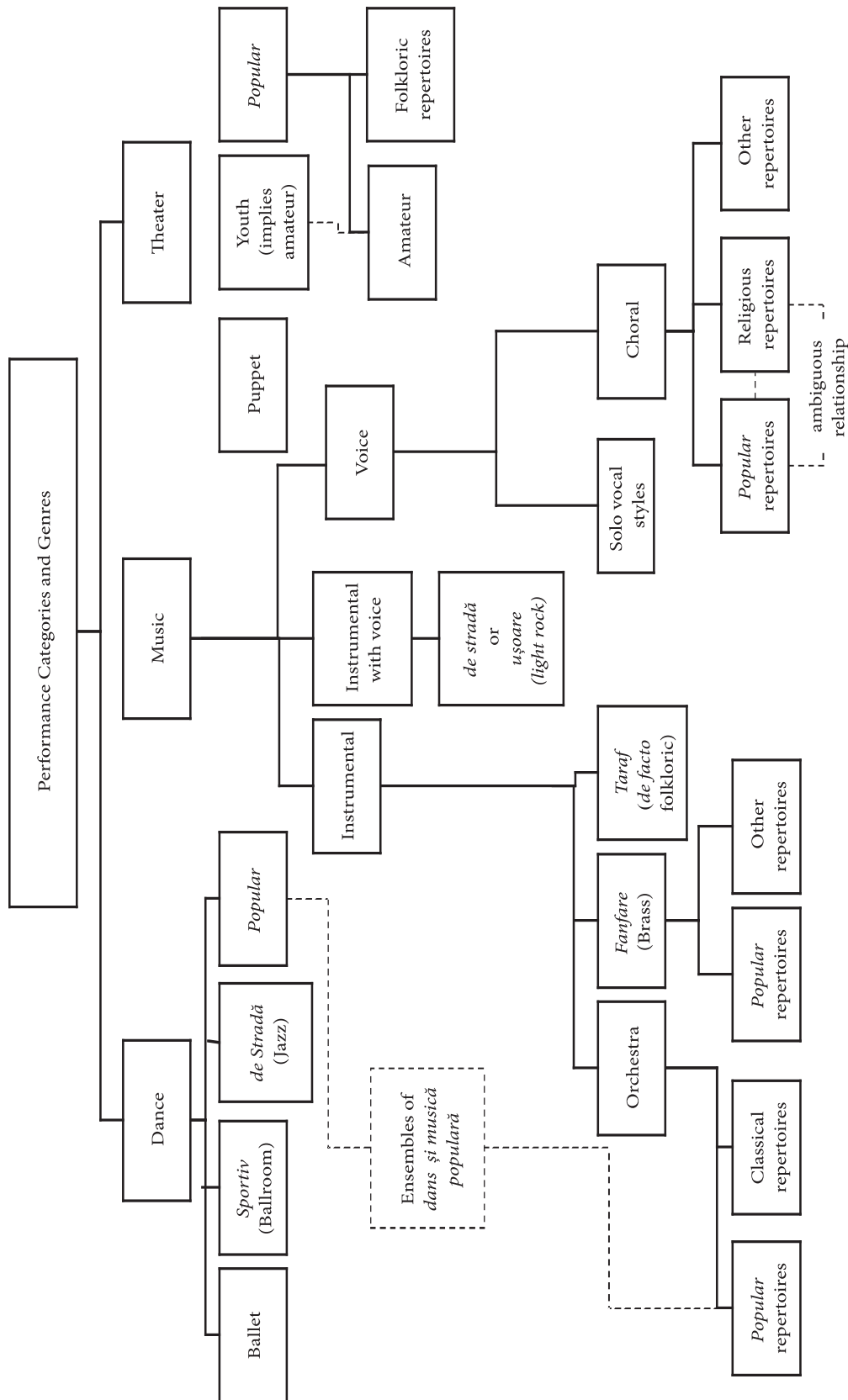


Figure 2. Performance Categories and Genres

Table 2. A Partial List of Folkloric Festivals

Festival	Participant Age	Date (for 2001, or approximate)	Frequency	Edition	First Edition	Organizer	Other Sponsors	Location	Other Designations
La Vatra Horelor*	Children and youth	March 4, 2001 (gala)	Annual	8th	1994	City of Chişinău, Dept. of Science, Youth, and Sport		Chişinău	*Municipal *Folklore, broadly defined
Lioară, Lioară, (Festival of Spring Customs)*	All ages	March 18, 2001				Department of Culture, Cahul County		Village, Cahul County	*County *Spring traditions
Duminica la Florii*	Children and youth		Annual	5th or 6th	1996/7	City of Chişinău, Dept. of Science, Youth, and Sport	Host: Ensemble "Moştenitori" from School #11	Chişinău	*Municipal *Easter/Spring traditions
Duminica la Florii*	Children and youth	April 6-8, 2001	Annual	5th	1997	Ensemble director of "Moştenitori" from School #11	Ministries of Education and Culture, and City of Chişinău	Multiple villages, Cahul County	*International *Easter/Spring traditions
"Pentru Tine, Doamne" Children and youth	Children and youth		Annual	5th or 6th	1996/7	City of Chişinău, Dept. of Science, Youth, and Sport		Chişinău	*Municipal *Easter songs
Festival of Easter Songs Children and Youth	Children and Youth	Last held in 2000	Bi-Annual	3rd ed (2002)	1998	National Palace for the Creativity of Children and Adolescents			*Republic-wide *Easter songs
Festival folcloric*	Children and youth	April-May, 2001	Bi-Annual	7th	1989	National Palace for the Creativity of Children and Adolescents	County departments of instruction	Multiple: Gala concert in Chişinău; 3 regional semi-finals; first-round competitions in every county-seat	*Republic-wide *Folklore
"Nufarul Alb"	Adults (alternates yearly between adults)	June 26- July 2, 2001	Annual	7th	1995	Department of Culture, Cahul County	National Center for Folk Creation		*International *Folklore

Table 2. A Partial List of Folkloric Festivals (Continued)

Festival	Participant Age	Date (for 2001, or approximate)	Frequency	Edition	First Edition	Organizer	Other Sponsors	Location	Other Designations
"Maria Dragan"	Adults	July 20–22				National Center for Folk Creation (unverified)			*Folksong
Festival folcloric*	Children and youth	City Day, October	Annual	6th	1996	City of Chişinău, Dept. of Science, Youth, and Sport		Chişinău	*International *Folk-dance
La Vatra Horelor*	Adults (and youth)		November	Annual		National Center for Folk Creation		Multiple: Gala concert in Chişinău; 3 regional semi-finals; first-round competitions in every county-seat	*Republic-wide *Folk-dance
"Tamara Ciobanu"	All ages; separate competitions for children and adults	November 12–22, 2001	Bi-Annual	7th	1989	Musicians' Union	Ministry of Culture	Chişinău	*Republic-wide *Folk-song *Individual performers, not ensembles
Festival that alternates with Tamara Ciobanu (name unverified)	All ages; separate competitions for children and adults	November	Bi-Annual			Musicians' Union		Chişinău	*Republic-wide *Individual performers, not ensembles
"Să trăiți, să înfloriți"	Children and youth	Dec 25–Jan 14	Annual	10th	1992	City of Chişinău, Dept. of Science, Youth, and Sport		Chişinău	*Municipal *Winter traditions
Festival of Christmas and New Year's Customs	Children and youth	Last held in 2000	Bi-Annual			National Palace for the Creativity of Children and Adolescents	County departments of instruction	Multiple: Gala concert in Chişinău; 3 regional semi-finals; first-round competitions in every county-seat	*Republic-wide *Winter traditions

### Difficulty of “Reading” a Performance Outside of the Festival Circuit

When one steps away from the perspective of ensemble directors, festival judges, and the host of other specialists who instructed me in the criteria of authentic folklore, it is even more difficult to ascertain how “free” culture really is from politics or ideology. Considering the prevalence of public folkloric performances described in this article’s very first paragraph this is an important question to ask. The following examples illustrate the difficulty of interpreting the political intentions of folkloric ensembles when they perform for the public. Indeed, although the above-listed festivals are open to the public, they are not widely promoted as entertainment, and rarely draw a substantial audience beyond the performers themselves.

One might ask, for example, how organizers choose to include a folkloric group in a public spectacle, or why ensemble directors accept performance invitations. At a certain level, neither organizers nor ensemble directors issue and accept invitations to perform with an intention to signify special relationships between performed folklore and audience. For example, one ensemble director had his group perform for the Communist Party’s celebration of Lenin’s birthday in 2001. The group is officially designated as a *popular* dance group, but since its director is a specialist and well-known authority on folkloric dance at the National Center for Folk Creation, I was directed to observe his “hobby” ensemble as an example of authentic folklore.

Based on the position as an authority on folklore held by the director of this ensemble, and his involvement in encouraging the performance of authentic folklore, one would not expect his ensemble to have performed for the Communist Party. For many citizens, the party’s electoral victory in 2001 was threatening. It signaled a return to Soviet-era ideology and practice regarding ethnic and national relations: the denial that Moldovans were culturally, historically, and/or linguistically Romanian, and the establishment of Russian as the acceptable language for public use. For my informants, the Soviet period also referenced the institutionalized practice of stylizing and hybridizing folklore. Thus several ensemble directors I knew kept a close eye on how communist-organized public events incorporated folklore.

So why did this ensemble perform for the Communist Party?—It paid. The same ensemble also performed on April 25, 2001 on an occasion that seemed to be honoring a certain kind of worker in one of the capital’s neighborhoods. Neither the director nor his performers knew what the occasion was, and did not seem particularly bothered that they did not know why they had been asked to perform. Perhaps the celebration seemed innocuous enough, or perhaps the economics of perfor-

mance precluded too close a scrutiny of the surrounding politics of the occasion.

Other ensemble directors also have their groups perform on occasions that they do not entirely understand or support. For example, *Moștenitorii*, a group based in Chișinău, performed at the “folkloric festival” in August 2001 which accompanied the celebration of Gagauz Yeri’s independence. In this case, the group performed because the invitation came from the director’s friends—another ensemble director and a member of Gagauzia’s local Department of Culture. Even then, the Gagauz ensemble director who helped invite *Moștenitorii* did not expect the ensemble to actually come because he knows the ensemble’s director does not support the formation of Gagauz Yeri as an autonomous region.

*Moștenitorii* also performed on Doctor’s Day. Like the unknown celebration of April 25, this celebration was organized by the administration of one of Chișinău’s districts. It is clearly a celebration carried-over from the Soviet period, but, like Women’s Day, is considered a basically innocuous holiday. The ensemble director’s wife does work in the medical profession, but his immediate reason for having his ensemble perform was—again—that an acquaintance in the local administration had asked. On other occasions, ensemble directors are told by their superiors to “show up” for a performance. Thus the appearance of a folkloric ensemble at a public or semi-public celebration does not represent a transparent support for the occasion being celebrated, or the common political values of ensemble directors with those who invite them. The participation of children can certainly not be taken as evidence of their, or their parents’, agreement or support of the celebration.

In other instances, however, ensemble directors very much support the occasions for which they perform. *Moștenitorii*’s appearance at the annual commemoration of Ștefan cel Mare’s death is one such example. Ștefan cel Mare (1457–1504) unified the medieval principality of Moldova, and since the late 1980s, if not before, he has become a symbol of the Romanian-ness of Moldovans. Ștefan cel Mare also represents the legitimacy of an independent Moldovan state, a fact reflected in the capital’s landscape with its major thoroughfare named for the former ruler, and a monument to him located at the entrance of the central park so as to gaze toward the city’s main cathedral, bell tower, and arc of triumph. Consequently, the commemoration of Ștefan cel Mare’s death is also a commemoration of the Romanian-ness of the Moldovan people, their desire for independence, and the legitimacy of a Moldovan state. The director of *Moștenitorii* shares these values, and performed with the other adults in his ensemble as an act of personal commemoration.

Yet how might a spectator know that this ensemble’s director supports Romanian identity and Moldovan sov-

ereignty, but does not support Gagauz autonomy within Moldova? How can a spectator distinguish folklore that is performed as a gesture of friendship and collegiality from folklore that is performed as a form of political allegiance? When can a spectator excuse an ensemble's complicity in promoting the Communist Party because it performed out of economic necessity? In truth, only detailed knowledge about an ensemble director's personal politics and particular position within a dispersed network of patronage and personal relationships can reveal the full political intent of any single folkloric performance.

### Conclusion

The public visibility of folkloric performance genres in Moldova provides a window onto the subtle politics of culture and national identity in this small country. Once, while riding to a festival with a well-known ethno-musicologist, I asked why there were so many folk singers. Andrei Tamăzlacaru paused for a long while before softly voicing his hypothesis: because Moldova is such a small country, people are crowded, and lift their voices to define themselves. As always, Tamăzlacaru offered a poetic interpretation to a question I had imagined primarily in historical, political, and economic terms. I would have suggested that it had something to do with the state providing training and employment opportunities for so many individuals, but clearly my answer only explains how people become publicly visible and recognized as "singers." It does not explain why they would sing in the first place.

Continual probing reveals that even the most "authentic" folkloric performances in Moldova are still entangled in a variety of forms of national politics. Exercises in dis-entangling these forms of political activity are critical for further understanding the local system of constraints that individuals repeatedly encounter. These constraints effectively politicize an individual's actions, positioning him or her relative to the state's dominant perspective on ethnic relations and national identity, as well as a host of other social issues. At the same time, the emergence of self-consciously "authentic" folklore in Moldova also reflects a counter-discourse in which individuals deny the state's claim to the products of their labor and creativity. The successive developments in folkloric categories and activities reflect both discourse and counter-discourse on the proper relationship between state, society, and individuals in creative activities.

### ENDNOTES

1 *Horă* is a round-dance with many varieties, and a basic step pattern that corresponds (in principle) with two steps forward and one backwards; *batută* is a dance that

does not travel, but involves beating the feet in a rapid and strong rhythm. In principle, only men are considered physically capable of dancing *batută*, but women who can keep a "manly" rhythm are well-appreciated by their audiences. *Doină* refers to songs involving "themes of love, nature, longing, sorrow, and grief" (Apan 2000:878) that can also be performed as instrumental pieces without lyrics, especially on flute. Romanian ethno-musicologists consider the genre uniquely Romanian. Each of these three genres has equivalents in Romania, a fact that supports the assertion that the majority populations of Moldova and Romania share a common culture, as well as language. Thus even the identification and documentation of local folklore have political implications, as will become clear when Moldova's historical context is further discussed.

2 The research reflected in this article was supported by the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) with an Individual Advanced Research Opportunity (IARO) grant for doctoral research in 2001, as well as summer pre-dissertation field research grants from three sources at Indiana University: the Department of Anthropology (1999, 2000), the Office of International Programs (2000), and the Russian and East European Institute (1999). I gratefully acknowledge the support of these institutions, and claim full responsibility for the ideas presented here.

3 Readers interested in a more technical and historical discussion of local music and dance may wish to consult the entry for "Moldova" in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (2001:890–897) or Valeriu Apan's entry for "Romania" in *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music* (2000:868–889). Apan details characteristics for each of Romania's major regions; while he does not include Bessarabia, his discussions of music and dance in Moldavia ring broadly true for the Republic of Moldova. Explicit comparative research between Romania and the Republic of Moldova only became possible in the 1990s (Beissinger 1993:5), meaning that a comprehensive and balanced assessment of cultural similarities and differences will take some time to emerge. In the meantime, foreign scholars should approach all presentations of music, dance, and other traditions in Moldova with the awareness that existing studies usually highlight features that make the local culture of ethnic Moldovans seem either more or less similar to Ukrainian, Russian, and Romanian cultures.

4 Throughout this paper I generally use the term "Romanian-speakers" to refer to members of the "Moldovan" ethnic group. I do this to emphasize that "Moldovan" ethnic identity is established first and foremost through language. The language can be called either "Moldovan" or "Romanian," but—as will soon become clear—the choice of one term over the other, like the choice to refer to people who claim this language as their native tongue

as “Moldovans” or “Romanians,” has political implications. Whatever their position on identity politics, however, most people in Moldova will concede that there are minimal linguistic differences between the Moldovan language and literary standard Romanian. Thus it seems most precise and least political to use the phrase “Romanian-speaker” when speaking simply of demographic patterns and trends. I prefer to reserve the use of “Romanian” and “Moldovan” for situations that require a nuanced discussion of individual political orientations among members of Moldova’s majority ethnic group.

5 I use Romanian terminology for each of these ensemble types. *Folcloric* and *etno-folcloric* ensembles differ by whether the ensemble performs traditions collected from its home village (*etno-folcloric*) or performs traditions collected in another village (*folcloric*). In either case, these ensembles must be able to document the source of any material they perform. In Russian, *popular* ensembles are referred to as *narodnyi* (national).

6 The participation of a handful of Gagauz and Bulgarian ensembles in folkloric festivals and competitions complicates this analysis. In my dissertation, I discuss how the criteria for “authentic” folklore subsume the ethnic dimensions of Gagauz and Bulgarian folklore under a more general emphasis on village identity; I also discuss how minority traditions, especially those of the Gagauz, can be rendered as variants of “Moldovan” or “Romanian” traditions (Cash 2004).

7 The “folkloric” quality of choirs is an interesting discussion. Local specialists generally consider choirs non-folkloric for two reasons. First, choirs do not seem to have been organized in villages before the Soviet period. They are therefore not “traditional” from a village-based perspective. Secondly, choirs do not necessarily sing folkloric pieces. They may sing religious or world musics, for example. When they do sing folklore, the pieces are usually composed. Thus, even choirs with folkloric repertoires stand a good chance of being considered inauthentic. Nevertheless, there are individual choirs respected for their authentic performance of folklore.

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