

**”You shout out loud that Christmas is on 25th  
even if you are an atheist”**

*The coexistence of the old and the new calendar styles in Moldova*

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## Abstract

Lately a growing number of people in Moldova - an overwhelmingly religious country— began to celebrate Christmas according to the new style calendar despite the firm Church dissent and assign various justifications to this practice, either religious or essentially secular. This research inquires into the phenomenon one might entitle “*duplicated Christmas*”, in which social, cultural, economic and politic factors seem to interweave. This exploratory endeavor looks into the variety of discursive representations Moldovans have about this duplicated holiday in contraposition with the ecclesiastical stance. I argue in this thesis that the temporal dislocation of Christmas according to the Gregorian calendar is significantly related with (1) the growing church disengagement in Moldova and (2) European aspirations of the pro-Romanian citizens as a form of contestation of the Moldovan statehood and soviet past. The Christmas date is showcased as a temporal point normatively imbued through which the pressing force of tradition can be problematized and the postsocialist evolution of the relationship between church and modern state. This thesis concludes also that, considering the firm insertion of secularist influences against the backdrop of the persistent normative pressure exerted by certain (religious) traditions, the difference between liturgical and civil/social time tends to be blurred and for the sake of convenience, there is growing will to uniformize these two timescapes.

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## Introduction

Lately a growing number of people in Moldova - an overwhelmingly religious country<sup>1</sup> – began to celebrate Christmas according to the new style calendar and assign various justifications to this practice, either religious or essentially secular. The Moldovan Orthodox Church subordinated to Moscow Patriarchate uses the old style liturgical calendar which lags 13 days behind the new style calendar (Gregorian)<sup>2</sup> while the latter one is generally used for civic purposes. In practice, this distinction is not very clear; many people still cannot explain the differences between the calendars, or furthermore why there are two dates for Christmas, Easter and other major holidays. While the Church denies the existence of this confusion (declaring it a false problem created by media) and maintains Christmas observance on 7 January, the number of people who swing from one calendar to another increases with every year. Each December, once the winter holidays draw near, an aura of confusion dominates the public discourse in Moldova: when should we celebrate Christmas? When was Jesus born? Are *we* wrong or *they*?<sup>3</sup> The debate intensifies in mid December with various voices arguing and taking sides, but the question circulates aimlessly without really being answered. Then the issue lies dormant the rest of the year until the next December approaches.

While the official church is loyal to the Patriarchate of Moscow and officially observes the old style holidays, a nucleus of well-educated people, intellectuals and public figures advocate for the official implementation of the new style calendar in the religious life in Moldova. Ostensibly, there is no agreement regarding this issue among the leaders of the ruling alliance either. In 2012 the Moldovan government decided to make 25 December a day off for state employees with the condition to substitute it with another working day. Yet after an intense debate in Parliament, the Liberals' proposal to introduce the new style Christmas as a permanent holiday in the calendar was not approved. As for the ecclesiastical stance, last year the secretary of Moldovan Metropolitanate<sup>4</sup> confirmed through a

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<sup>1</sup>More than 90 percent of the population nominally belongs to one of two Orthodox denominations (International Religious Freedom Report 2005). The religious practices are maintained as a routine even by those who declared themselves atheists: crossing in public, attending church, offering charity in the name of the dead etc.

<sup>2</sup>While New Year's Eve is customarily marked according to the Gregorian ("new style") calendar, that is on December 31<sup>st</sup>.

<sup>3</sup>The new stylists

<sup>4</sup>The highest rank a clergy man can detain in an ecclesiastic Eastern Orthodox institution, after the patriarch.

media declaration that all the local 1520 parishes held the Christmas service on 7 January. In 2012 only a limited number of churches had religious service on 25 December. In the meantime, the winter festivities last longer, comprising both styles (from 24 December to 14 January) while the in between interval is characterized by leisureliness at large and a festive slow pace of life. According to the Public Barometer from May 2011) the Orthodox Church is the most trustworthy public institution in Moldova (more than 80 percent); therefore the transition to the new calendar, despite the official Church dissent is unusual and calls for an effort to understand its social-cultural underpinnings.

The Gregorian timekeeping – in the framework of the major changes occurring nowadays: massive migration, de-secularization, post socialism - typifies the confusions brought about by transition and globalization. This suggests an apparent erosion of collective rhythms and schedules, as Zeruvabel would put it (1982, 1985, 2003). This disorder in the traditional perception of time (and not only) is suggested by the very public debate regarding the date of Christmas. There are numerous cases in history of calendar reform, but all of them have emerged from the superior strata of society, be they ecclesiastic or solely political and almost always people opposed resistance. Now we have a contrary case when the movement starts from the bottom, from the average people aiming to impact the superior structures and to gain support from the rest of the society. The calendar issue renders the traits of a typical debate in which each position is grounded on specific values and interests.

It is hard to assess the amplitude of the debate in the Moldovan public space. Yet in no other country (to my current knowledge) where the old style calendar is (still) in use (Russia, Georgia, Ukraine, Serbia etc.), a similar debate of comparable proportions seems to take place. Moldova's status of “cleft” country (Huntington 2006), unresolved identity dilemmas and national political projects appear to be figuratively reflected in this micro social fact. Moreover, there is no other similar research undertaking meant to explore the social-liturgical underpinnings of this phenomenon through the lens of culturally discontinuous temporality.

This research inquires into the phenomenon one might entitle “*duplicated Christmas*”, in which social, cultural, economic and politic factors seem to interweave. This exploratory endeavor looks into the variety of discursive representations Moldovans have about this duplicated holiday and into the

significant implications this temporal dislocation might have. Through extensive interviews, I sought to address the following question:

*What prompts and motivates the decision to celebrate Christmas on the new date?*

Further on, what happens with the old date and what is the ecclesiastical stance in this regard?

I argue in this thesis that the temporal dislocation of Christmas according to the Gregorian calendar is significantly related with (1) the growing church disengagement in Moldova and (2) European aspirations of the pro-Romanian citizens as a form of contestation of the Moldovan statehood and soviet past.

At the theoretical core of the present thesis lies the tension derived from the successive imposition of different temporal views in the recent history of Moldova, starting with the calendrical reform in 1924 up to present. The following temporal course has been considered: from the rural orthodox temporality of interwar Moldova to the soviet attempts to secularize time and purge the calendar of religious holidays towards a religious revival after the 1990s to the present moment when the advancement of capitalist understanding of time laps over the already established syncretic time structures. The theoretical chapter illustrates the importance of homogeneous uniform time in modernity and the way the Gregorian emerged from a catholic institution and was gradually established as the standard-referential of time on a global scale. Further on, a particular emphasis is placed on the role of the calendars for the group identity and the ways it can be instrumentalized to serve certain political projects.

This holiday appeared to be suffused with meaningful thematizations I have tried hereby to decipher: the longing for identity, the longing for social recognition both from the State (by making it a permanent holiday) and from the Church (by officially adopting the new style) pervaded the narrations of my informants. Time changes as shared understandings and choices of sequences change (Tilly 1994:272) Likewise, it transpired from my interviews: that another sequence of events is now desirable, that New Year's Eve should follow Christmas and not precede it for instance. I was therefore interested also to pursue how the new date is domesticated and integrated in the ritual rhythm of the year, how it is deliberately invested with new significance and proclaimed as holiday on a voluntary basis.

## CHAPTER 1: Theoretical background

This section looks into the particularities of temporal experience derived from the practice of mingling two parallel calendar frameworks. The Christmas date is showcased as a temporal point normatively imbued through which the pressing force of tradition can be problematized. The explanatory scheme involves concepts such as temporality, calendar, domestic rhythm, tradition and secularization. The route we follow hereby is from time as a compelling organizing principle of the social life (Durkheim 1964), towards the qualitative perception of temporality as organized by calendars (Zerubavel 2003, 1985, 1982), state time (Tilly 1994) and imagined communities (Anderson). Temporality is here considered from the perspective of coexisting multiple periodicities and rhythms. As we seek to examine the impact of the increasing phenomenon of secularization on the body of religious tradition, a brief discussion about the postsocialist evolution of the relationship between church and modern state is provided. This paper might be integrated within the framework of ritual studies at conjunction with social memory and the sociology of time.

### 1.1 Temporality and calendrical time

Time is commonly regarded as an effective device of separation and order, essential to the social organization of religious life. Durkheim in his analysis of the social organization of religious life stressed the role of temporal segregation as a principle of social organization (1964: 104). No event can take place concomitantly at two different time periods, therefore any particular act or event would be necessarily located within a sacred time period or within a profane time period, yet never in both (Zerubavel 1982/1985:101).

There are two possibilities through which the peculiarities involved by a potential calendar reform may be examined through the prism of the two opposed philosophical perspectives on time indicated by Norbert Elias (1992: 4). The first one is the objectivist view, according to which time is an external autonomous instance which cannot be controlled, interfered with, adjusted, or altered. The



second possibility entails a subjectivist theory which places emphasis on the human consciousness as the source of time which can be thus manipulated for specific uses.

The constitution of *social time* indicates the imposition of the sociocultural will on the times of the cosmos, nature and the body, as Adam has suggested (Adam 2004: 77) Comprising both the body and the clock time, social time can be performed and constructed, repeated, regulated and reproduced (Adam 2004). It is materialized in an inherent order which represents a ‘social fact’ in Durkheimian terms, which exerts influence that exists beyond individuals ‘whose lives are organized and whose experiences are recalled and calibrated around it’ (Simpson 2012). Man has the capacity to grasp intuitively the multiple sense of time and to alternate them accordingly even if they entail diverse qualities (Adam 1994: 508) Following Giddens (1984), Scannell (1988:5-7) has distinguished three intersecting temporal planes in the structuring of broadcasting which I believe are valid in general: clock time, calendrical time and life time<sup>5</sup>. The multifaceted time is measurable in „units of clock time, by celestial motio, with the aid of recurrent events and through changes in our bodies”. Birth advises that more attention be paid to intersection of multiple social rhythms and cultural temporalities. even though clocks and the Gregorian calendar emphasize a self-referential uniformity of time (2012: 99-100).

### 1.1.1 Qualities of time

The qualitative conception of temporality puts a particular emphasis on man’s sociocultural ability to distinguish between the “qualities” of periods of time that are identical from a mathematical standpoint but qualitatively different (Eliade 1956, Zerubavel, 2003:110). Time interrupts the undifferentiated continuum and arranges it into distinct intervals and intermissions. Thus time is conceived culturally as discontinuous by inserting intervals of liminality into the flow of time. Daily time represents an alternation between a time of constraint and a time for pleasure, time spent and time lost, time of sleep and time awake (Heintz 2005). Beach (1987) inquired into the time allocations to work and household duties in rural settings. The results showed that time was not uniformly assigned,

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<sup>5</sup> Postill believes this classification is not helpful, since there is no much difference between the first two. In addition, Postill contends that a biographical historical use of CCT is preferable to the third temporal category introduced by Scannell.

but flexible and dependent on the daily tasks and specific needs. In their non routinized work days and schedules, these families display a distinctive concept of "work time." Results found here also suggest a special complexity about time as a resource to be managed in home-based enterprises. (Adam 2004:75)

*The traditional time* has been defined as cyclical rather than linear, qualitative rather than quantitative, reversible rather than irreversible, encapsulated in tradition rather constituting the motor of the history, organized by routine and practical tasks rather by the clock, oriented to stability rather change, geared to natural rather than calendrical rhythms (Adam 1994:504). From a Christian (Orthodox) point of view, the trade in time is theft because it is a transaction of something that does not belong to individuals. Jacques le Goff explains why capitalism and the money economy could not develop in the orthodox part of the world, since time could not be used as an abstract exchange value (cited in Adam 2004:125) This view is not compatible with the capitalist ideology, as Heintz has also remarked. Most Romanians do not consider time as a commodity at all; it is neither for sale, nor for purchase (Heintz, 2005:183) they do not manage their time, they simply use it.

### 1.1.2 Calendrical time

The first systematic sociological explanations of temporality pertain to Eviatar Zerubavel, a prolific American writer on the standardization of time (1991, 1981). Zerubavel maintained a functional view on time, derived from Durkheim, who contended that time ought to be measured and the calendar's function is to assure regularity while expressing the rhythms of collective activities. (Durkheim 1956:23). Thus, the calendar was the first institution through which cultures established and maintained temporal regularity. Social coordination, synchronization and temporal regulation need to be located in a temporal framework that transcends the specific society (Adam 2004:107). Nancy Munn (1992:109–11) inspected how certain 'calendric and related time shifts' reach into 'the body time of persons' by grounding them and their daily activities in 'a wider politico-cosmic order'.

Anderson described suggestively the what he called „empty, homogeneous time” in which all acts are performed at the same clocked, calendrical time, by actors who may be largely unaware of one other in an imagined community of the nation (1983/2006:27) Citizens have confidence that others

move in the same large but confined perimeter and perform the same activities as they within a similar calendrical frame. The calendrical coincidence, the date is „the essential connection – the steady onward clocking of homogeneous, empty time” or the imagined temporal linkage that binds them together. The homogeneous empty time has been held as feature of secularism (Asad 2003; Taylor 2007). Moldovan society seems torn apart from this respect as well. The calendrical issue is not perceived only in astronomic terms but more socio-culturally charged.

### 1.1.3 Calendars as symbolic time topographies

Calendars are instruments so naturalized and taken for granted that they escape reflection (Elias 1992:6). In the present paper, the calendar as the nodal concept of our explanatory scheme, is envisioned as a material support of time which comprises a set of normative practices and related memories. Secondly, it entails a temporal topography which instills a certain rhythm upon everydayness and prescribes specific loci of conventions, norms and conducts. By dint of convention and repetition, this rhythmicity is embodied in the form of habitual memory (Connerton 1989).

One of the major characteristics of any calendar is that it interrupts the continuous flow of time by introducing some recurrent “critical dates” (Zerubavel [1981] 1985:86). An organizing principle of time, calendars “grade and rank the days, they lay out a topography of function and power” (Paxson 2005:267). The calendar is packed with “lived symbolism, ritual action, elaborate, and deeply telling exegesis, and without a doubt, ideological battles” (Bourdieu quoted by Paxson 2005:268). Zerubavel (1985) reflected on the symbolic functions of calendars which act either as segregators (e.g.: the Jewish calendrical system) or as unifiers (e.g.: the Gregorian calendar). Paxson lays out three ways to anthropologically tackle with calendars, one of them being to view them as containing the substance of social memory (*ibid.*). Drawing upon Connerton, she restates their fundamental commemorative purpose within the temporal topography of the year, indicating that it is the collective identity *per se* that is being fashioned through the calendar (*ibid.*, 269). Calendars reproduce social orders and map both retrospectively and prospectively a group memory. In addition, calendar plays a major role in our mnemonic socialization (Zerubavel, 2003:47) The awareness that celebrating time is a community

occasion of togetherness is something that the larger society is gradually discovering through the experience of now living in a multi-faith environment of many groups with many calendars (O'Loughlin, 2012). Through the habituated performance of commemorative ceremonies, social memory is transmitted and reproduced (Zerubavel 2003:30; Connerton 1989:70-71), therefore calendars are conceived to embody narratives of group identity. Unlike Paxson (2005:267) who pointed out the prospective ordering function of calendar ("calendar orders tomorrows; they organize timescapes and map them"), in this paper, calendar is treated as a repository of collective recollection.

Postill (2002) reviews the ethnographic accounts of how calendar and clock time (CCT) has colonized the lifeworlds of populations that in previous centuries, or even decades, had no experience of using it. He encourages the fellow social scientists to proceed with the comparative cross-cultural study of CCT. Postill makes explicit 6 shortcomings in the anthropological study of time – namely, the tendency to deny the native's coevalness, the „western” notion of time, to overlook the irreversible global spread of CCT, to romanticize non-industrial societies, to neglect the time-media bond, and to exhibit a postcolonial fear of misrepresenting "the Other". The young anthropologist further examines the exceptional cases of "insulation from the effects of CCT" and puts forward the example of the Munebbih ethnic group which seems to live outside the moral-temporal order imposed by Yemen state and pursue a "fragmentary, irregular and interrupted" orally transmitted star calendar while time is "deeply rooted in bodies and emotions"(Gingrich cited in Postill 2002).

By providing socially standardized recurrent divisions of time, the calendars render repeatable the unrepeatable. The months and numbered days of the calendar represent repeatable patterns of the unrepeatable succession of events (Elias 1992:6). Thus calendars serve as a link between mankind and the cosmos. It is little wonder that calendars have held a sacred status and have served as a source of social order and cultural identity. Yet there are voices which proclaim the calendar a mere social contract with regard to their functional uses throughout the history<sup>6</sup>.

Rhythms are intimately related with calendars in the perception of time. Lefebvre (1992/2004)

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<sup>6</sup>The calendars have provided the basis for planning agricultural, hunting, and migration cycles, for divination and prognostication, and for maintaining cycles of religious and civil events.

operated a pioneering rhythmanalysis of everyday life illustrating the interdependence of biological, psychological and social rhythms and how temporal rhythms are actively reproduced in daily life. Each ritualization instills its own particular rhythm, that of gestures, words and acts prescribed in a certain sequence. Lefebvre (2004:94) pointed to several sorts of rites that punctuate the flow of time: firstly, religious rites (fasting, prayers, ablutions, the ringing of the bells etc.); rites in the broadest sense, simultaneously sacred and profane such as festivals and carnivals that inaugurate a period or bring it to a close; and finally, rites of intimate convivialities or external sociability (political rites, namely ceremonies, commemorations, votes, etc.)

#### 1.1.4 Standardization of time

Clock and calendar time (CCT) is one of the West's most successful cultural exports. It presently regulates the daily rounds of most people, artefacts and representations across the world. It is the invisible hand of market, state and civil society alike (Postill 2002)<sup>7</sup>. Bernward (2000) reflects upon the implications of the calendric hegemony of the Gregorian time order resulted from the superimposition of this supreme *Zeitrechnung* on all the local timekeeping systems. He wonders especially why have some cultures chosen to subordinate astronomical measurement to reckoning in terms of religious (astrological) orthodoxy? He implied that the Gregorian calendar is nonetheless not the same everywhere, that it ought to be adapted to the local micro-timescapes and rhythms: U.S. Christmas is not like German Christmas, to name just a banal comparison<sup>8</sup> James Carey (2009) explained that the regulation, synchronization and standardization of time was an essential tool used by the state and corporate capitalism to extend their control over national landscapes and daily lives. Among others, Alfred Gell (1992) discussed the universality of the perception of time (east and west, modern and primitive).

The Gregorian calendar was used as the prevalent standard temporal reference framework only within the boundaries of the catholic world (Zerubavel 2003:98) and possibly this is why it was

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<sup>7</sup>It would be interesting to follow how CCT has colonized the lifeworlds of populations that in previous centuries, or even decades, had no use for it (*cf.* Thompson, 1967 *apud* Postill 2002).

<sup>8</sup>Thus a fruitful research direction (and essentially indicative of the present paper's aim) is to look into the tensions derived from the superimposition of standardized industrial times upon local/vernacular times.

regarded by the non-Catholic world right from the outset as an exclusive Catholic institution. Russia remained “wedded to the Julian Calendar, introduced by Peter the Great in 1700, and only moved to the Gregorian calendar in 1918 as a symbol of Bolshevik modernization” (Shaw 2011). Currently, the Gregorian calendar cannot be regarded any longer as a Christian institution; rather, it has become one of the major symbols of western civilization at large: “It is international, inter-religious, inter-occupational and inter-racial” (Zerubavel 2003:99).

## 1.2 Tradition and (non)secularism

The liturgic calendar is intimately intertwined with the religious life and its dynamics. While the American sociologist Peter Berger has heralded the desecularization of the world more than one decade ago (1999) and Davie (1994, 2002) and Casanova (2006) presented a secular post-Christian Europe in contrast with the seemingly religious USA, Naletova (2009) suggested that in the orthodox part of Europe (with a particular emphasis on Moldova and Romania<sup>9</sup>), the modernity is non-secular. Based on international surveys on people's religious attitudes and practices, Naletova's analysis revealed a high level of religiosity in the Eastern part of Europe “as if never had been touched by modern secularity.” Tomka (2011:11 cited by Dungaciu 2006:242) „the religious revival in EE may relativise the de-Christianization of the Western Europe”

The "secular" identity shared by European elites and ordinary people alike turned "religion" and the Christian European identity into a „thorny and perplexing issue” (Casanova 2006) The same Casanova suggests using the term „unchurching” of the European population or „religious individualization” rather than secularization for the definition of the gradual alleviation of religious traditions and practices at the collective level. Grace Davie has called it "believing without belonging" pointing to an implicit, diffused, and submerged Christian cultural identity within European space (in Casanova 2006) while the reverse is also true "belonging without believing " (Hervieu-Léger 2003 cited in Casanova 2006).

The Church inertia in Moldova might be accounted through a peculiar Eastern reluctance

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<sup>9</sup>The findings of the Aufbruck study (2007) show that 95% of Moldovans and Romanians are likely to be believers.

towards the Western influence. Modernization accompanied by secularization is customarily regarded by traditionalist countries as pernicious influence of the West. Makrides and Uffelman (n.d.) examined the anti-Westernism fuelled by Eastern Christianity and have ascertained the existence of specific negative attitudes developed by the Orthodox towards the West. The debate between East and West seems ideologized, the differences deliberately exaggerated in order to sharpen the incompatibility and disjunction between the two parts of Christianity (e.g., the rationalistic West versus the affectionate East; the individualistic West versus the communitarian East). Moreover, the authors signalled the growing suspicion towards the Eastern Orthodox diaspora in the Western countries deemed to be a source of unwanted contamination. What seems more striking is the use of Orthodoxy as a compensatory mechanism to overcome Eastern European deficits and to undermine Western progress and superiority (Makrides and Uffelman). I concur with the authors in their call for a more in-depth examination of the phenomenon of Orthodox anti-Westernism for it continues to play a massive role in the formation of social orthodox representations in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe.

While tradition is deemed as suffocative and obstructing, the modernity presents itself as an optimal alternative to be embraced. By the same token, Lankauskas's ethnographic account shows the prominence of 'the West,' symbols, meanings, and imaginings in daily discourses and practices in postsocialist Lithuania. The Soviet past conjuncted with Lithuania's 'traditionalism' and 'Eastern backwardness' are similarly contrasted with the prospects of the transnational modernity and values imported from the Western world (2002).

As it will be apparent from the empirical section, the calendar debate is heavily carried out in civilizational terms: wishful European identity vs. Soviet legacy. The tensions between the 2 major groups in Moldova: Romanians and Russians and West and East accordingly make Moldova fall, in Huntington's terms, under the tag of „cleft”<sup>10</sup> countries ripped apart by major groups which claim to belong to 2 or more civilizations and thus „gravitate toward civilizational magnets in other societies”

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<sup>10</sup> A torn country, in contrast, has a single predominant culture which places it in one civilization but its leaders want to shift it to another civilization. They say, in effect, „we are one people and belong together in one place but we want to change that place” unlike the people of cleft countries, the people of torn countries agree on who they are but disagree on which civilization is properly their civilization.

(1996:138).

### **Final remarks**

The present paper aimed to provide a theoretical discussion of the peculiarities of multiple calendrical times and has hereto examined the existing literature in the field of temporality, dealing with notions of social time and qualities of time. At the center of this scrutiny was the concept of calendar as the essential device of chronomanagement of daily and religious life as well as for social coordination, synchronization and temporal regulation. Following the efforts of global time standardization and synchronization despite existing vernacular systems of measuring temporalities, this theoretical inquiry has also considered the eventual tensions between the traditional body of practices and the pressure for reform and adjustment in the context of the increasing effects of secularization.



## CHAPTER 2

### 2.1 Overlapping Time Trajectories: a diachronic perspective

#### 2.1.1 Reform Calendar in 1924 and the Aftermath

*"I believe in the holy cross, I don't believe in stars"<sup>11</sup>*

In 1924 the Romanian Orthodox Church decided to adopt the revised calendar for the liturgical life but the implementation of this reform was at least problematic. Religious people in the traditional sense perceived the calendar in complete harmony with natural phenomena. Holidays were portions of time which were even more cherished. In the archaic representation of time, the holiday was regarded as a *holy* interval of time. Displacing this interval meant to violate the law of nature. Changing the established dates for all the natural phenomena would disturb the constituted order and the inner rhythm of nature: trees would still go green and the fruits would ripen only according to the old dates. Time was not regarded as a human construction but as a definitive intangible divine arrangement. To interfere with time would mean to interfere with God's creation (Antoanesei 2008; Gavriluta 2002; Bancila 1924; Bernea 1932).

By bringing in accounts on folk temporality by two remarkable Romanian interwar ethnographers Bernea (1932) and Bancila (1924), Antoanesei (2008) showed that folk time had an organic meaning, almost a mystical, non-conventional one, therefore the reform was perceived as an aggression. One of my informants, Maria recalls her grandmother telling her that Romanian guardians were wandering through the streets with sticks checking on people whether they performed the old style rituals: "God forbid to see kids going sowing or going with Plugusorul<sup>12</sup>". Appealing to ethnic psychology and a folk understanding of temporality, Bancila argued that the interwar Romanian society was encapsulated in a stage of "ethnographic culture", which was constituted of traditions in an intangible whole. If the calendar reform in 1924 "at the level of intellectuality seemed a matter of mere chronology", in the popular understanding, the calendar was not perceived a "conventional" measuring

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<sup>11</sup> Informant, Bernea 1932

<sup>12</sup> Romanian winter tradition

system which can be perfected, adjusted anytime. For the Romanian peasant the calendar equated religion itself and all the significant past and present rhythms of existence, if not "elements of a true cosmology" (Antoanesei 2008). An ethnographic report is available regarding the impact of the 1924 calendar reform in the Moldovan village Cornova. The peasants have been reportedly overwhelmed with a "metaphysical apprehension" and opposed staunch resistance when the new calendar was imposed. Some of them refused to attend churches or sabotaged the local religious services or ultimately kept both styles and thus two series of holidays. "I believe in the holy cross, I don't believe in stars" an old lady would say (Bernea 1932). The only rural residents who seemed more open to this decision were those who seemingly had closer ties with the city ( Bernea 1932cited in Antoanesei 2008).

The reasons brought by the authorities at that time to justify this decision are strikingly similar with the arguments circulated in the contemporary debate about the calendar: that all other Orthodox states had adopted the Western calendar and it was hightime Romanian citizens took up the same calendar which was -allegedly- scientifically more correct. Conversely, the ethnographers had their explanations. They concluded that the very reasons that underlied this phenomenon were related to the alleviation of the true religious feelings among intellectuals together with the increased practical spirit in the institutionalized church (Antoanesei 2008).

Bernea also evinced that the Romanian peasant was not interested in rhythm and efficiency, but cared more about the timing of his actions, for how properly these actions are placed in time, at their time. In this manner, time is made responsible for the efficiency of certain actions for it can be favourable or ominous, therefore doing things when they ought to be done (id est according to an established calendar) is the key to achieve meaning, order and efficiency. For this reason, the household activities were designed to take place in certain time frames while a series of temporal interdictions indicated which intervals are appropriate to do something and which not, e.g.: when to start a journey, when to work or when to avoid doing certain types of activities etc.

To conclude, the understanding of temporality of the dominant intellectual and political class did not coincide with the symbolic representation that the Romanian peasants had about time, which is why it encountered firm resistance from the rural population. Any schedule change produces

uncertainty in the qualitative perception of temporality especially for the Romanian peasants who viewed holidays as sacred intervals of time and not observing them timely meant to disrupt the natural rhythms of life nature.

### 2.1.2 Clandestine Religiosity and the 1989 Turning Point

During the Soviet regime, time was reinterpreted and redefined through a calendrical reform which was meant to remove the church holidays by downgrading them to regular working days (Malte 2000). Malte demonstrated that the soviet time keeping was instituted namely in order to replace the orthodox traditional holidays aiming complete secularization of the society. Years are time units which abound in recurring life-time events, both secular and religious. Celebrating the New Year at the beginning of January slowly came with the Gregorian calendar. Irrespective of the style, New Year's Eve was customarily marked in the evening of December 31<sup>st</sup>. Moreover, in the soviet times, New Year was officialy held as the main holiday of the winter season. It was the occassion on which the state employees's children received gifts from Ded Moroz<sup>13</sup> personified by the state. Moldovan people still long for the Soviet times when they received state-sponsored gifts for their children on this occasion. “The soviet calendar managed to give to 'novyi god'<sup>14</sup> a genuinely festive tone” (Paxson 2005:284). On the other hand, Christmas was a holiday pushed outside the public sphere, celebrated more or less covertly only by religious people in the countryside for “any display of religious commitment could prejudice not only one's job but also the positions and prospects of a wide circle of relatives and friends (Hann 2006:2).

Religious traditions have survived mainly in the countryside, where people would hire priests and perform rituals in secret. When the secular soviet ideology collapsed in 1989, “religion spilled out almost everywhere into the public sphere” (Hann 2000, 2006; Casanova 1994). The postsocialist religious revival was intimately connected to the politics of ethnicity and nationalism and the politicization of religion under socialism meant that no aspect of religious identity after socialism could be free of the political (Hann 2006:6-7). While examinining the postsocialist progression of Moldovan

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<sup>13</sup> The Russian version of Santa Claus

<sup>14</sup> New Year's Eve (translated from Russian)

Orthodox Church in quest for exclusiveness and historical privileges, Monica Heintz demonstrated the salience of religion in rural Moldova despite massive secularization (2006).

The major Christian holidays started to be officially celebrated in 1991 as a result of the "confuse" resolution from 26 December 1990 of the Supreme Soviet of the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (Baiesu 2008:33). According to it, the traditional civic holidays (New Year – 1 January, beginning of spring - 1 March, International Women's Day – 8 March) would be marked on the new style (Gregorian) calendar while Christmas according to the old style calendar (7 January). Thus citizens were expected to legally celebrate New Year (new style) and then proceed with the old style Christmas on 7 January. This actual order conflicts with the succession of the religious holidays, because the believers are still in the fasting period. "Nativity should come first", claimed many of them.

Soviet atheism managed to partly eradicate the religious traditions, including the practice to celebrate solely in the old style. Therefore, after the 1990s, the educated and urbanized citizens especially seemed not closely tied to the Julian calendar like their parents and grandparents. Hence, in Chisinau and in the province, many people adopted the new style smoothly alongside the old one imposed by local churches (Bogatu 2012). After a "godless" studentship and maturity, it was easier to decide the "when" of the new holidays. As one of my interlocutors, the 65-year-old Baiesu remarked: "When I was a student, the world was not created by God"

Within one's extended family, divergent positions towards religion are often encountered. Disagreements are not openly manifested, but not completely spared either. "My sister was a smart woman, we used to have lots in common. Now she's telling me these stories...I don't think I will meet my grandmother's soul in the afterlife" (Baiesu). His fellow, Ion, 70 years old confided passionately in the Marxist theses during his tumultuous youth and he still does. That is his "calendar" now. He has got 5 sisters and one brother. He does not understand them when they confess their faith in God. His wife is a believer as well. Ion accepts other people's religiosity as a datum, but he can hardly sympathize. The discussion around the calendrical dichotomy does not make any sense for him: "I take after people. Those who take over the power decide how people live and what and when they should celebrate". Ion and Baiesu's statements are an example of secularized understanding of time after the soviet model,

where the state manages the time of its citizens and no religious significance is attached to the calendar.

Maria instead represents a case of spiritual reconversion after the 90s from the soviet secular conception of time to the liberal orthodox paradigm<sup>15</sup>. We met in her university office where she works as a secretary. Two calendar posters were pinned on the wall above her desk. One bore the logo of the university and the other one had a huge cross in the middle. While I was staring at the 2 posters naturally placed next to each other, she stands up and reproduces verbally her mental succession of holidays as follows:

If you go to church, you memorize. One knows that on 28 August is the Dormition of Virgin Mary, 21 September Virgin Mary's Birth, and, Larisa, it's your birthday too (she points at her colleague), then the Apostles Peter and Paul and then Saint George, Saint Nicholas and Holy Chross..

Celebrating holidays and keeping the successive continuity of them all throughout the year is a significant practice for her. She confesses from the very outset that she is truly attached to the orthodox values and she is keen on following the holidays and attending pilgrimages to Romanian orthodox monasteries every summer. The turning point in her life proved to be the eradication of religious restrictions after '89 which has to be praised "for bringing us back to faith". She used to "swallow" all the tenets of the scientific materialism in college but now she is thankful she "will not die a pagan".

### 2.1.3 The Christmas Tree Saga

On 9 December 2007, a Christmas tree had been erected by the municipal staff in the central square of Chisinau, capital city of Moldova. Although it was purposively guarded by three young members of the Liberal Party's youth organization in the mayor's personal car, the tree disappeared overnight "like a Christmas wonder" (ProTV). The tree watchmen reported to the media that they had been taken away by civil policemen at midnight for a 2 hour stroll in the city. When they were back at 2am, the tree was not there any more. It was found on the second day placed elsewhere in a park. Two weeks later, after unsuccessful negotiations and haggings with the central authorities, the 4 hour long new style Christmas concert had to be held on an improvised stage, with no lights and sound system. Next year, in 2008, the tree was "arrested" by the traffic police on its way to the capital city. When he

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<sup>15</sup>Further on, it will be shown how she combines the dates.

learned the news, the pro-Romanian mayor Chirtoaca burst out laughing hysterically. "The holiday cannot be stolen", he famously stated then. BBC wrote in December 2007 that the row over the Chisinau Christmas tree underscored once again the clash between pro-Western and pro-Russian tendencies in Moldova. The Christmas tree saga continued in the following years, when the frictions between the municipal and the central authorities took different proportions.

Customarily, the municipality is in charge of the preparations for holidays, but starting with 2007 since the liberal mayor has come in office, the communist authorities appealed to police collaborators to get rid of the Christmas tree installed *too early* in the center of the city. The operation was interpreted as a Communist strategy to prevent any new style manifestation of the Orthodox Christmas. According to press reports, the Communist President Vladimir Voronin intended to be the one to turn on the lights for the holidays in Chisinau, but no sooner than December 30. Moreover, it was reported that the communist authorities pressured the pro-Romanian mayor to give up his idea by stopping the delivery of hot water throughout the city (including in kindergartens and hospitals) and threatening to interrupt public heating as well (Calugareanu DW - Dec 2007)<sup>16</sup>.

This incident has triggered lots of anecdotes, jokes, video compilations and parodies on the internet regarding the childish rivalry between the two dominant parties in Moldova. It was derisively called "The War of Trees", "The Tree Operation" or "The Odissey of the Christmas tree". One of the videos renders the meeting of youngsters gathered on the spot of the missing Christmas tree in the snow of December 2007. A girl was keeping a notebook open and a pen in her gloveless hands, ready to write down whatever the action committee would decide. They convened to protest against the communist dictatorship and sabotage the tree of the communists. Their conversation featured one of the long term (but not overtly laid on the table) objectives of the committee: unification with Romania.

The prolonged series of anecdotes regarding the missing/arrested/replaced Christmas tree in the center of Chisinau are evocative for the emblematic battle between the two dominant political

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<sup>16</sup>The reaction of one passer-by is suggestive: "How can they dictate us when to mark the holiday?...If every country sets up the Christmas tree on 1 December...I find that our people already became soulless. Real mockery" (DW 2007)

forces in Moldova, which aim to instrumentalize the holiday and its symbols to popularize their political array. The communist authorities were not fond of the early Christmas preparations in the capital city, claiming that this is an unwanted Western influence which endangers the local traditions. On the other hand, the liberal mayor Chirtoaca committed to his objective to make Chisinau an “European capital city” and synchronize it with the standar time reference, insisted on making early arrangements for this holiday, despite the Communist hostility. Hence two opposing ideological projects involving temporality as a tool of symbolic negotiation: one that is oriented backwards, pretending to watch over the pursuance of the religious traditions of the country, but actually interested in preserving the actual political order, while the other is looking forward the implementation of the Western political project and standard mode of temporality.

## 2.2 Alternating Holiday<sup>17</sup> and Social Time: Christmas in between

This section will present synchronically the various timescapes which play a role in the conflictual ground of the calendrical issue: the orthodox temporality developed on the founded soviet secularized and state-controlled time in the light of the capitalist imbued concept of contingent timing which seems to gain ground in Moldovan society.

Generally, two simultaneous stances coexist in one's individual lifeworld: h/she is (conventionally) both a citizen and a believer, and correspondingly h/she has to negotiate between the social and the liturgic view on time. If before the 1990s the citizen facet was prevalent, afterwards a fine balance between the religious side and the civic side needed to be settled. The social timescape conflicts with the liturgic view which conveives of time as cyclical and hallowed. The holiday time is a qualitatively *different* (not necessarily religiously charged) portion of time cropped from the flow of social time which may include divergent understanding of temporalities. Negotiating when is the most appropriate *timing* for the holiday time, or more precisely, the most correct date for Christmas, is the focus of the present thesis.

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<sup>17</sup>This section will include the experience of non-believers as well, therefore I preferred to use the denomination of “holiday time” instead of liturgic time.

A considerable number of Moldovans have decided that 25 December is a more convenient date for them to celebrate Christmas for various reasons, a pragmatic decision which resulted from negotiated concordances among given sequences. The historical sociologist Charles Tilly shows how the citizen's time is controlled directly by state through employment and by establishing their own inescapable temporal references: clock times, calendar times, schedules of school and work, etc. (1994:274). Given that Christmas was not typically made a day off, the soviet state employees could visit their parents according to tradition<sup>18</sup> only on the second or the third day afterwards. After the 1990s, the winter vacation included Christmas, but only the old date.

Between Christmas (a profusely Christian holiday) and New Year (an essentially lay feast), there are only six days. The order of the holidays was not conflicting back then, but it became apparent only after the 1990s when celebrating New Year before Christmas threatened the religious commandment to fast before Christmas. According to Tilly, time changes as shared understandings and choices of sequences change (1994:272) Likewise, it transpired from my interviews: that another sequence of events is now desirable, that New Year's Eve should follow Christmas and not precede it for instance, that therefore, the *timing* needs to be revised, or rather, adjusted. Used to an extended festive season, some informants complained that even when granted a day off for the new style Christmas, their vacation is disturbed, and they cannot get to fully enjoy it. "You have a day off, and then you work, and then it's the New Year's Eve, this is a like a childish game, but it's not unfortunately. There is no adequate perception of this holiday" (Eugenia).

As for the liturgical calendar, when asked about its utility, some of my respondents envisioned discursively a mental map in which holidays come in a specific succession, before or after other holidays in a fluid continuity. In this case, calendars are dispensable; the memory of holidays is enhanced through practice (going to church) which instills a specific memorized order. Other respondents professed that they are not normally aware of the holidays order but are always reminded about particular ones through hearsay or word-of-mouth.

The loci of the critical dates in the calendar are established through sustained practice, but also

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<sup>18</sup> It is a customary practice to visit parents on major holidays, especially for Christmas and Easter.



through an intentional valorization of the holiday time. For instance, Eugenia (36 years old, a single mother and a university lecturer) has voluntarily invested the new date with special significance and invests in it all the set of meanings Christmas might have for her. She invited me over for dinner on the Sunday before Easter when it was allowed to eat fish. I asked her when is the true Christmas for her, and she said that spiritually, psychologically she is all for the new style. Eugenia believes this is due to a psychological maturity and self-sufficiency. The early breakage from the parental milieu set her on an autonomous path along which the family traditions loosened up gradually. She moved to Chisinau from the countryside 20 years ago, founded her own family and can therefore decide upon her own ritual pace of the holidays to be celebrated. Last 25 December was an absolutely ordinary day, Eugenia recalled. It is when students come for the last consultations and pass the last exams. Unlike other people who prefer to celebrate with abundant foods, she spent the evening of Christmas with a calming green tea:

it was a real joy and reverie for me, because the holiday matters especially psychologically. It was an ordinary day through the activities she carried out but extraordinary because I knew it was not an ordinary day and from this respect this day is tremendously special for me (Eugenia).

The specific interval in which the holiday unfolds is a different time as Eugenia posits: “I feel a tremendous energy these days, a great unknown energy which one cannot experience in ordinary days” Zerubavel ([1981]1985:101-103) and others Eliade 1956; Durkheim [1915](1964) have dwelled on the qualitative perspective on time and the temporally situated meaning of social acts. Having a calming green tea on a (deliberately chosen) Christmas evening is not the same as having a calming green day on an ordinary day. Eugenia anchored the meaning of Christmas in a certain interval of time cropped from the temporal flow and proceeded to relate to this date in a significant manner. By virtue of the principle of temporal differentiation, the acts are qualitatively segregated as well. She remembers that 10 years ago on the new style Christmas day a group of students knocked at her door to sing her carols. “I was working! On the Christmas day I was working again. I was very touched that they reminded me that it was Christmas”

Even if the religious commandments seem to be followed only by certain social groups, usually

by aged people, they nevertheless exert latent *normative pressure*. Especially in the public space, when some are interested to keep up appearances. I asked one of my interlocutors what is the difference between a holiday and an ordinary day? He wryly answered that „on holidays one works in secret so that neighbours don't see him because it is not appropriate to work on holidays, God forbid, while on ordinary days everyone is labouring overtly” (Baiesu). Thus a negotiated definition of time emerges, one which includes both the social time and the holiday time with boundaries within easy to transgress.

Another aspect that might be worth discussing in this context is the concept of *contingent timing* which refers to tasks whose ideal time is dependent upon some other activity cycle in the timescape or contingent on the behavior of others. (Birth 2004:107-108) This becomes apparent in the cases when one has to cater for the multiple temporalities existing in one community. For instance, Sorin's father owns a shop of building materials. „He cannot say, people go home, I won't sell anything because today it's Christmas”. One has to be prepared in the case carol singers pop in: ”If well-wishers stop by at your house, you won't chase them away. You got to be prepared just in case” (Sorin, 25 years old).

In this chapter the diachronic and the synchronic perspective on temporalities have been juxtaposed for the purpose to show simultaneously the evolution of the calendrical issue and its current social and political particularities. I indicated that the secularization process due to globalization and migration has inevitably affected the religious traditions in Moldovan society leading to the institution of a new understanding of temporality that made possible the discussion of the intended revision of the calendar.

## CHAPTER 3:

### **”You shout out loud that Christmas is on 25 even if you are an atheist”**

#### **3.1 Methodological remarks**

For the purposes of the present paper, I have carried out in-depth semistructured interviews with 10 well educated residents of Chisinau who proved to be in unanimity followers of the new style calendar. Seven of them belong to the community established around Saint Theodora from Sihla cathedral<sup>19</sup> which is unofficially entitled the „church of intellectuals”. Age of my respondents ranged from 25 to 60+ with various degrees of religious engagement. To counterbalance this group, I conducted a series of extended conversations with priests who pertain to the official church and vehemently defend the old calendar. Thus I intend to place in opposition the discourse of change which emerges mainly from the civil society with the defensive discourse of the clergy.

The calendar issue affects a significant number of people, possibly every Moldovan citizen who chooses to pay attention to it. Although it is not facile to determine a representative sampling of respondents when doing an ethnography in a big city, I decided for Chisinau because commonly, the urban dwellers are more likely to adopt the change of style in calendar. I have explained earlier that the religious salience is more present in the countryside where people are more prone to preserve the religious traditions. Consequently, the calendrical issue is more acute and intensely debated in the urban environment. Yet only a small core of people (politicians, priests, ethnographers, intellectuals) seem to have a representation about it or a definite position.

I was new in the field and I was searching for potential interlocutors. For this reason, I visited Baiesu, a peaceful ethnographer, at his office in the Academy of Science who offered valuable insights in the local field. Baiesu was the first to mention Sihla as the ”Church of Intellectuals” and guided me to the community which became the focus of my research. This arose while introducing me to the

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<sup>19</sup>Saint Theodora from Sihla is the cathedral of the Metropolis of Bessarabia, an architectural masterpiece in Byzantine style located in downtown Chisinau.

(religious) members of his office and friends who all seemingly attend Sihla. "Ala, he points to her desk in the same room, doesn't miss any Sunday service. Monday morning I get the report of what was there". This is how I met Ala, Galina and Maria, 3 middle aged women who look after the spiritual affairs of their extended family in different degrees and regularly go to Sihla to get priest VM's word of wisdom. Further on, through the snowball effect, I came to discuss with other friends and acquaintances. All of my respondents are somehow connected with each other, and possibly share comparable grounds for their worldview.

## 3.2 The Ecclesiastical stance

### 3.2.1 The two Metropolitanes: between Moscow and Bucharest

After the USSR collapsed and Moldova gained its independence in 1991, the Moldovan Orthodox Church remained under canonical subordination of the Russian Orthodox Church, while a group of clergymen advocated to resume liturgical ties with the Romanian Patriarchate. The latter have founded the Metropolitanate of Bessarabia<sup>20</sup> in Moldova, with autonomous metropolitanate under Romanian canonical protection (Keston Institute 2000).<sup>21</sup>

The Bessarabian Metropolitanate holds a minority status, managing less than 200 parishes compared to the number of over 1000 parishes claimed by the Metropolitanate of Chisinau. Since it has been established, it has struggled to obtain official confirmation from the government but it did not gain it until 2002 when the European Court for Human Rights interfered in its favour. Stan and Turcescu (2003) demonstrated that the Moldovan government refused recognition to the Bessarabian Metropolitanate until 2002 mainly because the Moscow Patriarchate did not want another Orthodox

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<sup>20</sup>What is particularly interesting is that the Metropolitanate of Bessarabia is officially using the old style calendar also, although it publicly tries to advocate the adoption of the new style.

<sup>21</sup>The Bessarabian Metropolitanate sees itself as the legal and canonical successor to the pre-Second World War Romanian Orthodox Church in Bessarabia (the part of Moldova between the Nistru and Prut rivers (Felix Corley, Feb 2000); On the website of the Romanian Patriarchate, the Metropolitanate of Bessarabia is part of the office for Romanians around the borders. According to the State Service for Religions (SSR), the Moldovan Orthodox Church (MOC) has 1,224 parishes, and the Bessarabian Orthodox Church (BOC) has 199 parishes.

Christian church in Moldova outside of its jurisdiction. This conflict reveals the nature of intra-national relations between Moldova, Romania, and Russia and their correspondent churches as well as the Russian efforts to maintain ecclesiastical hegemony in the ex-postsoviet space (ibidem). In contrast, the Moldovan Metropolitanate has always had a privileged status being overtly endorsed by the government<sup>22</sup>.

There are divided opinions about the prerogatives of church in this matter. Natalia, a psychologist, adopted a conciliatory tone and argued that church should not antagonize groups, but let people celebrate as they like and therefore deliver the divine service on the both dates. Eventually, time will decide which group is bigger and Church will be able to make a choice based on this evidence. Yet another interlocutor, G. condemned the „profit-oriented” clerics who agree to hold the service twice on both styles, whilst they should have a clear statement regarding this for they are entitled to ”know the truth”. On the other hand, clergymen are considered decisive factors in the calendar debate. „If only there were a clever priest who would say 'people, we have thought and we find it acceptable to celebrate like in the western world', people would take after him but if people led by Metropolitan Vladimir keep saying 'no'...people would eventually change the situation by themselves. They will say 'Father, let us celebrate as we like' (IB)

### 3.2.2 The Unshakable Canonical Tradition: the Defenders of the Old

It is largely contended that the decision of the Russian Orthodox Church to keep the old calendar in 1918 was „an ambition to be independent from catholic world” (Baiesu 2008:34) According to a Romanian website dedicated to Christian orthodoxy, the remaining orthodox churches which did not adopt the calendar after 1924 recognized „in principle” the necessity of correcting the calendar, but they have not applied it yet fearing for disorders among believers and waiting a more favorable psychological moment<sup>23</sup>. Almost a century later, in the Moldovan society time seems ripe for such a change but the Moldovan Metropolitanate canonically subordinated to the Patriarchate of Moscow obstinately aims to stick with the traditional temporal framework.

<sup>22</sup> When it was established in 1993, the legal status stipulated that Moldovan Orthodox Church, subordinated to Moscow Patriarchate, is independent in church-administrative, economic, educational and civil matters (BOM status Nov 1993)

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.crestinortodox.ro/liturgica/calendarul/calendarul-bisericesc-stilismul-70736.html>

The Moldovan Metropolitane<sup>24</sup> Vladimir treats this subject briefly in the preface of a book (Munteanu 2006). He admits the issue of calendar arises regularly and an increasing number of believers put forward the question whether it is not high time the Church avoided duplication and gave up the „obsolete calendar” and settled for a single calendar, the Gregorian one, the one which is followed by the majority of the world. The Metropolitanate asserted the old style calendar to be more than "a math table, which can be subject to any pseudo-scientific 'revolution'". According to him, any breach against the calendrical rhythm represents a violation not only of the historical chronology, but a violation of the rhythm of life as a whole (in Munteanu 2006:97). The old style equals the memory of the church canonical past which ought to remain unshakable because they are the foundation of Orthodox Church's existence. It constitutes the regulatory rhythm of Church life which would be dramatically disrupted should the intrusion of the new dates be accepted. The arguments he invoked in favour of perpetuating the old time framework are related to the "preservation of tradition", "resistance towards occidentalization", and even towards "catholicization". The high clergy contends that the new style emerged from catholicism and it can bring only separation and disorder. In addition, 'the holy flame' is an event which is invoked as a proof that the temporal reckoning of the Eastern Orthodoxy is the truthful one<sup>25</sup>.

The decision to adopt a new date for the holiday from their own initiative points out diluted church authority in some believers' eyes (contrary to a recent survey's results which indicated more than 80 % trust in church). Although a passionate believer, Eugenia does not attend church anymore because she does not feel comfortable with the orthodox rituals. She recalled an episode when she was a student and entered a catholic church. She sat on a bench and enjoyed a few minutes of silent meditation. Eugenia referenced this moment as a micro epiphany which revealed her „how an authentic religious experience should look like”. In contrast, in the orthodox churches, there are always some pairs of critical eyes who follow your conduct, she mentioned. One cannot confess properly because

<sup>24</sup>The highest ecclesiastic position in the Orthodox hierarchy

<sup>25</sup>This miracle which consists in instant bursting of a flame inside the church where allegedly Christ had been buried on the Orthodox Easter Eve is heavily instrumentalized for political reasons. Since the Communist Party was in power, an express plane is sent to Jerusalem on this date to take the fire and distribute it upon return all over the country. The show of deliverance is accompanied by enhancement of the political authorities as protectors of Church and faith, every year a notable politician funding this operation.

intimacy is not possible when „there are tens of people waiting at your back, when the priest pretends to listen to you and you pretend to confess”. Thus although the Church is credited with an absolute degree of trust, Eugenia revealed a hint of rebellious attitude towards the established traditions in the orthodox dogma.

Generally the new style (or the Gregorian calendar) has been identified as a catholic institution and the Orthodox refusal to adjust the liturgical calendar is much related to a wishful differentiation from the latter. The episode recounted by Eugenia admits the possibility that pro new style orientation can be correlated with a pro-western attitude including increased chances of compatibility with the catholic dogma. Zerubavel with reference to the Jewish people shows the crucial importance attributed to the role of a separate calendar in order to establish intergroup boundaries and distinguish themselves from non-Jews. A unique temporal order shared by a group of people functions both as a unifier and as a separator (Zerubavel [1981] 1985:70). In a similar fashion, the Moldovan church (and implicitly the Russian Church too) feels this boundaries of their communities as threatened by unwanted tentatives to pervade them. Making them permeable would possibly imply subverting the organic solidarity established within the community.

The calendar issue is sensitive for the clergy nevertheless. Whenever I tried to get in touch with a theologian and announced my subject, I was either dismissed or given a passionate speech in favour (Metropolitanate of Bessarabia) or against it. For instance, a theologian was absolutely intransigent: "Church should not modify the calendar according to the civil holidays which usually come down to food and drinks" (Munteanu 2006:99). Priest Munteanu was especially angered that people keep calling the holiday "Christmas": "Only we and and Russians pay credits to the true cause of this day. This day should be called Nativity, like the Russian word "Рождество".

Prominent journalists contend that despite the growing social support for such a legislative measure to be taken, the Church's consent is required (Bogatu 2012). Church cannot disregard the increasing number of citizens/parishioners who celebrate the new style Christmas. Even if Christmas has already acquired a strong secular dimension, it is originally a Christian holiday, therefore "the celebration of the Nativity without Jesus would be nonsense" (Bogatu 2012).

### 3.2.3 The "Church of Intellectuals": Saint Theodora from Sihla Cathedral

A notable community is established around a church located in downtown Chisinau which is one of the headquarters of the Bessarabian Metropolitane under the patronage of the Romanian patriarchate. The priests here are well renowned public figures who have an overt nationalist position and plead for the adoption of the new style. Its proRomanian orientation is apparent from the number of books of Romanian history and poems, pictures and tricolour artefacts displayed at the entrance.

The eyes of gray haired clergyman VM sparkled when I told him I would like to do a research on the issue of calendar. "Finally", he exclaimed, and immediately dismissed his previous interlocutor who had a tricolor scarf around his neck: "I have a very important discussion with the miss here", he explained. During our conversation, he claimed the change on the basis of a biblical verse: "After resurrection, Jesus told the apostles to go preach the gospel *according to the nations* not throughout the Roman Empire. We are not part of the Russian people, let everybody know this...that we are not so coward to deny our origins". The biblical truth intermingled closely with the identity problematization. VM condemned openly both the Moldovan Metropolitanate for the perpetuated submission to Russian ecclesiastical influence and the Russian Church for leaving little decisional space to Moldovan clergymen. He talked gently, almost whispering, but his politeness was pervaded by indignation:

Give me a break with this loveless dominion...when do you prove that you love God? When you let other nations the liberty to love themselves, it is a duty. Moldovan church hangs on the Russian church because we are under Russian influence, especially from an ecclesiastic point of view (...) I see in all this movement to maintain the calendar a Velikorousian (velikorus) concept by which they want to show us that they are the best Christians" (VM, Sihla priest)

Sihla clergymen are known to propagate a more liberal approach on orthodoxy by virtue of the necessary association between the scientific truth with the biblical truth: „God made the nature, the universe. Why don't we guide ourselves after the universe but we choose to take after the Russian matushka?" (VM) The priest from Sihla church further contended: "the calendar does not change anything from the church cult, this is the truth. It is not a cult related tradition, it is just a tradition, a mere concept" (VM) Another priest from the same church, S., opined in a similar fashion: "The same liturgy, commandments, canons, prayers...only time differs, so it will be good to change"



Sihla is rightfully mentioned in people's discussions as an elitist religious institution which convenes like-minded people around pro-Romanian pro-European values. Priest VM spoke with great consideration about the community that has formed around this church and hinted repeatedly that this is not a common community of parishioners, but a select society of

very intelligent people who care about the fate of this nation (...) The well informed and cultured people come to honor the birth of Jesus Christ together with all Christianity...no, just because, well, the Russian matushka...25 December reaches them only on 7 January...(VM, Sihla priest).

When we finished our conversation, two awaiting women immediately approached him to ask advice. The man with the tricolour scarf around his neck was waiting patiently too.

### *Sihla on the Flowers' Sunday 2013*

The grand cathedral of Moldovan Metropolitanate and Sihla cathedral are 5 minutes away from each other. The cathedral is located in front of the Government building, neighbored by the Arch of Triumph, a large square and a park with dozens of benches hidden in greenery. Sihla is located on a side street, amongst highschools and cultural institutions. On the Sunday before Easter (called "Flowers' Sunday" in the Eastern Orthodox tradition) believers commemorate Jesus' triumphal entrance into Jerusalem by carrying flower bouquets to church. In the large proximity of the main cathedral, the powerful choir voices can be heard through the speakers. I picked up a discussion between three ladies walking leisurely with immense bouquets of lillac. After briefly discussing the weather and the announced 14 rainy days in May, one of them urged the others: "Let's try Sihla." "Too crowded there, here at least we can sit on a bench"

The front stairs of Sihla church were packed with people indeed: dignified gentlemen in suits conversing in murmurs with headscarfed ladies, young couples, fathers carrying babies, women holding flowers and candles. There was a lot of fuss inside out; the atmosphere was suffocative yet majestic. Nothing could be heard from the divine service; people waited quietly for something to happen. When a monk in a long robe went out, voices from the crowd asked him why they had not installed microphones. "They are on, but they don't seem to work", he replied. Yet people preferred to stand up and wait patiently until the priest will come out and bless the crowd and the flowers. Galina has arrived

late with her niece who was carrying some green branches of willow. They could not get inside because it was full therefore Galina mildly teased her niece that they missed the sermon because she could not wake up earlier. The fact that a considerable number of believers preferred to stand in the crowd outside the Sihla church without any chance to grasp bits from the liturgical lecture while 5 minutes away there was the Cathedral with enough room for everyone and speakers to hear the melodious choir seemed indicative of the importance of attending a specific church for one's status and social definition.

This year the new style Christmas service at Saint Theodora from Sihla was attended by the liberal leader and the mayor of Chisinau. Interviewed by journalists, the mayor Chirtoaca confessed that he had not always celebrated Christmas on 25 December but since he "has found out" he celebrates new style but also old style in remembrance of his childhood times. Thus the mayor together with other influential figures through his public attendance serves as an inspiration for many of his followers and prompts them to join him in his choice of church.

### 3.3 Social articulations

*„One cannot turn a Soviet mentality into an European one overnight” (Eugenia, 36)*

Vociferous positions take over the public space but the subject does not seem to be exhaustible nor can we guess to what extent it is well received by society. The persistent question when it is more appropriate to celebrate Christmas renders the calendrical dilemma most strikingly. The two sides voice arguments which transcend the calendar issue and touch upon sensitive aspects related to identity, ideological options and political projects. The subject is being discussed in media, in feature articles and repeated political initiatives to adopt a legislative decision in this respect are being put forward. But no resolution has been reached yet. The issue of calendar is not high on the public agenda but it regularly resurfaces when the major holidays draw near, Easter but especially Christmas.

A significant number of my respondents advocated in favour of the new style for various reasons. It is allegedly more accurate and therefore more efficient in coordination of the social projects. According to media surveys, the reason the majority of people celebrate New Style Christmas is to be closer to Europeans and those who hold onto the Old Style do so mainly because Church dictates so.

The identity conundrum was the most recurrent thematization, brought up regularly by my informants. The Moldovan weak statehood and deficient relationship with the state laid the grounds for many of my respondents to envision themselves in an expanded national project, one that would integrate the Moldovan people into the realms of Romanian nation. At the same time, this constant longing for temporal unification with the neighboring country Romania is supplemented by the aspiration to ally with the rest of the world, epitomized by the European space which is "civilized" and exemplary. In addition, I will show later that mass media, especially the Romanian TV broadcasts have an important role in the dissemination of the western model of Christmas celebration.

While waiting for the passports to be checked in the Romanian – Moldovan customs office, the driver of the bus was making small talk with a few passengers around him. It was a week before Orthodox Easter so the discussion was revolving around this subject when at some point the Moldovan driver asked: 'But when do Romanians celebrate Easter?' One of them looked really puzzled. 'The same as us', he replied. 'Nooo, it can't be', the driver resisted. 'Romanians cannot celebrate Easter exactly when we do.' 'No, it's the same', the other passenger insisted. The driver looked at him incredulously and changed the subject.

I have been contemplating the driver's bewilderment till I understood that the expectation that Romanians' Easter cannot be on the same day as Moldovans' is much related to calendars and to the assumed fact that Romanians follow the new style holidays. Although equally orthodox, the two countries are expected to have different dates for Easter as they have for Christmas and other holidays. This division is deemed necessary, especially from the ecclesiastic point of view, in order to mark temporally the boundaries between the catholic and the orthodox realms (Zerubavel [1981]/1985). Often, Romanians are taken for Catholics because they have different dates for religious holidays. The Romanian reality is referenced frequently as a comparison element in daily interactions. The most regular contact with the neighboring country comes through media and I recall numerous conversations rendering confusion about the differences in days for certain patrons' days.

## Identity conundrum // like Romanians do:

*“Tell me which Christmas you hold and I will tell who you are” (Cristina)*

Opting for one calendar or another is indicative of certain ideological preferences. The confusion around Christmas is often equated with the eternal language and identity dilemma (Romanian vs. Moldovan). This is how this politically clothed debate plainly reflects the tensions existing between the pro-Romanian and pro-Russian trends and other social cleavages in society.

As mentioned before, Romania represents a recurrent comparison factor. Perhaps the most recurrent trope in my discussions with informants was the longing for identity; the regret that there is no liturgical and cultural unity with the nation Moldovans identify themselves the most (Brubaker 2006) transpired constantly.

„When I was little, my parents did not tell me that we belong to Romanian nation, but mum was reading (...) and singing songs, she remembered well the interwar period. Since I was little I knew that my language is spoken there. My wish coincided with Vieru<sup>26</sup>'s. I have always wanted to see Romania (Maria)

Since his parents died, Papuc (65 years old, publisher) has celebrated only the new style holidays. Not very much of a religious person, his motivation appeared to be politically grounded to a great extent: „Enough with the Russian influence. We lived enough under the Russian shoe. Now we want to be with our people”. It is noteworthy that the supporters of the new style are not necessarily pious people. The majority of them came to this decision after a deliberate process of rationalization in which the confessional factors played a limited role. As Cristina, a cultural activist, declared: „You shout out loud that Christmas is on 25<sup>th</sup> even if you are an atheist”.

All the same, the discourse of Sihla clergymen bears the same identity yearning imprint. VM, S., and others from the community established around this church hold up their affective affiliation with the Romanian nation and actively promote it. In this case, the new style Christmas has become a means to express their identity option and popularize it.

The recurrent references to the Romanian nation made us wonder about the status of the *Moldovan statehood*. Anderson defines the nation as an imagined political community as both inherently limited and sovereign (1983/2006:6). As an indication of precarious national imaginary in Moldova,

<sup>26</sup> Grigore Vieru (1935 – 2009) – a highly-esteemed Moldovan poet who supported actively the reunification of Moldova with Romania.

one of my interlocutors, Maria confessed she had never imagined herself just in the limits of the actual borders of the Moldovan state. Heintz and others have also showed that Moldovan citizenship is a failed project and the successive efforts after independence to enhance statehood proved unsuccessful (2005).

While some believe that Church alone should tackle alone this state of disarray, others analyze this issue mainly in political terms. Papuc contends that the change emerged thanks to a political initiative: "Our legislators decided: 'Let us offer them an act of benevolence'". Yet Eugenia is discontented with the general impasse Moldova seems to go through: "As long as this situation (political) will be maintained in our country, there will be no clarity between new and old" (Eugenia). Still, Natasa got angered when I mentioned the political factor in this debate. She posited:

politicians have nothing to do with religion, they should not interfere with it, they cannot impose when and how to celebrate them. That would be a silly thing to do. Every politician is an ordinary man, they should decide for themselves. All they can do is to offer days off for everyone.

When I inquired about the economic consequences of an extended vacation, Natasa shrugged her shoulders: "They should interrupt this long vacation on 7<sup>th</sup>, I don't think it makes any sense to go on partying till 13<sup>th</sup>", she eventually added.

As mentioned earlier, the calendar debate is noticeably carried out in civilizational terms, where the "*the rest of the world*" is envisioned as the absolute alterity, as an exemplary instance to be emulated and take after. According to my informants, the new style calendar has been adopted by the majority of the „civilized” world, while the ones who cling on to the old chronology cannot cast the soviet mentality away. Transcending the exclusive religious significance of Christmas, the new style supporters say they want to celebrate this day as the rest of the world does, that they wish to synchronize their vacations with the „civilized” countries. Hence this 13-day delay is regarded like a deviance, like an anomaly which needs to be redressed as soon as possible. „This is how they celebrate in Europe, this is when Romanians celebrate, this is how all the other people celebrate” (Papuc, 60 years old)

*Past & Tradition.* The enduring calendrical duplication is deemed anachronic, as an embarrassing delay in time. By anachronicity it is hinted that a cyclic recurrent religiously and socially significant event is *not properly dated*, that tradition is obsolete. The old style time-reckoning is associated with tradition,

family past and related memories, but in particular it is viewed as a relic of the ex-soviet regime and a holdup from the standard time reference. The new stylists seem eager to break free from the inconvenient past, leave it behind and contemplate their future in a European project. Discovery of this „truth” came a long way, occurred individually and now people are expectant of measures to be taken. In the meantime, everyone is responsible „for what happens in the intimacy of their household” (Papuc).

Old Christmas is widely integrated in the „soviet mentality”, and therefore fairly repudiated as everything that is associated with the defunct system. After the USSR disintegrated, it was expected that a new era, structurally different in all its aspects, would commence. There has been instant hope for a radical transition from what was perceived as „soviet” into a new configuration of values. Although the Old Christmas is regarded as a soviet remnant, there are no reasons to hold this religious holiday as such, since during the soviet regime the pursuance of religious holidays was officially discouraged. Moreover, since the old style holidays have been preserved more in the countryside (but officially disapproved by authorities), a slight contempt towards the rural traditions might have still been retained after 90s. In contrast, Europe and its correspondent axiological constellation invoked by Eugenia as „European mentality” seemed an altogether seductive alternative as soon as the soviet dream collapsed.

The attainment of certain traditional practices is generally due to two factors. In the first instance, tradition is based on the assumption that what is enduring in time is correct and worth preserving (orthopraxy). Secondly, tradition equals with the unquestioned transmission of certain practices as long as one is under the auspices of nucleic family as in Maria's, Eugenia's and Natasa's case: "As long as I lived in my parents' house, I was never asked if I want to do this or that, it was tradition and tradition was compelling as it was in all families.” (Maria).

Eugenia has deliberately established the new Christmas as the „most natural from all points of view” but she says she „has to ” celebrate the old style holidays again because of her parents. She separated interestingly the two holidays; one can be qualified as a commemorative Christmas (as a tribute to her childhood and return to parents house) and the other one is personal, an intentionally charged date with symbolic significance:

The old style holidays are based on food consumption, mom cooks very tasty dishes I love since I was a child and from this respect, the old style holidays mean that...I savour these dishes and spend time with my family.

Yet as she advances in her narration, Eugenia seems to concede from her intransigence and acknowledge the retained significance of the old Christmas:

And this is not little...for the thrill you feel when you return to parents' house after you had been away for a long time is quite strong. And now to say that the old style Christmas is not equally true would be an offense for them [her parents] and not right for me.

*Emancipation.* Adoption of the new style is associated both with spiritual/psychological maturity (Eugenia) and with emancipation from an isolated political space. Some imply that the discussions about the new calendar have become possible due to an apparent liberation from the soviet insulation: "They begin to open their eyes...relations with Europe, Romania, this is what I think, we have been imprisoned for so long in this hole..." (Galina)

The awareness occurred gradually when subjects reflected on previous knowledge and come to analyze it critically "I knew that in Romania Christmas is marked on 25th, but it was a theoretical piece of information for me. Actually, I was wondering, 'God, how can they celebrate on 25th when my parents...!', but that was in the beginning. (...) This happened only after I was 25 years. Because only when mature enough, one can realize certain things" (Eugenia)

*The role of media.* Mass media appear especially influential in the dissemination of the western model of values and traditions. Unlike the western Christmas which appears to be the most prominent holiday of the year and domineered by the consumerist side, in the Eastern christianity the religious dimension of the holiday was especially cherished up to only recently. Yet in the last decade of years, the orthodox holidays seem to undergo alterations. Lately the Christmas preparations around the city start in early December. Thus the festive mood is brought about by the radiant city lights and the efervescent shops decoration. Not in the least, my respondents largely mentioned that they enjoy watching the numerous TV programmes anticipating the holiday, especially the Romanian ones. Thus the urban environment, on the one side, which is prepared for Christmas according to the laws of market and the access to the Romanian media programs, on the other side do instill the festive mood in early December, long before the official holiday starts.

Based on the media consumption, my subjects develop an inclination towards which holiday

style to pursue. The TV broadcasts anticipate and prepare the ground for the celebrations to come and thus "contaminate" its viewers with the festive mood. When assisting at the global celebration of Christmas all around the world through the TV broadcasts, many of them feel left behind: "Spiritually I am already in that mood and I feel that I cannot wait till January 7<sup>th</sup>" (Cristina, 29, policy maker). Media ensures a form of mediated experience, of indirect participation but nevertheless emotionally exhausting: "I'll tell you, somehow on January 7<sup>th</sup> we are bored with Christmas already" (idem)

Thus the impatience of starting the preparations stems from the urban environment and also from media „Irrespective of when I celebrate Christmas, I decorate the Christmas tree on December 24<sup>th</sup>" (Maria). By the same token, Galina is very fond of the Pro-Romanian mayor of Chisinau: „Because I watch only Romanian TV channels and I like them a lot. And I like Chirtoaca (Pro-Romanian liberal leader, mayor of Chisinau). How he decorates the city for Christmas...."

In the present chapter, I have conjoined the the theological stance with the most recurrent social articulations which revolved around sensitive issues like identity longing, contested Moldovan statehood and despised soviet past. The rather political conflict between the 2 high ecclesiastical institutions in Moldova renders the topic even more ambiguous. In the context of the vulnerable statehood and uncertain citizenship (Heintz), the calendar becomes, beyond its liturgical functionality, one of the means to express identity longing and political values. I have emphasized in the end the powerful role the media plays in the determination of style or another. The urban early preparations for Christmas and the Romanian channels do instil an expectative mode for the new style holidays within the Moldovan society.



## Conclusions

The present thesis is concerned with the coexistence of the two calendars in Moldova, the Julian and the Gregorian one, popularly called the “old” and the “new” style. By means of extended conversations with residents of Chisinau as well as priests from the both Metropolitanates, this thesis explains the reasons that prompted a considerable number of people in Moldova to adopt the new calendar dates in the last decade despite the official dissent of Church.

The theoretical contribution of this thesis resides in the conjugation of the diachronic and the synchronic perspective on temporalities in order to reveal how the calendrical parallelism originated historically and what are the current particularities that underpin the dynamics between the social and holiday time. I intended to suggest that the secularized understanding of time has prepared the grounds to discuss how well a holiday, a religiously charged date, fits into the overall temporal scheme of one society. Deciding the most convenient order of sequences and the most suitable timing for one holiday in the same manner one would decide when a certain secular event should better take place indicates this progression in time understanding to which the soviet attempts to secularize society and the more current global certainly disenchantments played a role.

Once the decision being made, one has to proceed with the valorization of the new time slot. I used Eugenia's story to illustrate how a new interval of qualitative time is invested with the significance of Christmas through a deliberate effort. The discussion of this topic has touched upon the blurring boundaries between social time and holiday (whether religious or not) in the light of the persistent normative pressure of certain traditions or habits (e.g.: to have rest on Sundays). The concept of contingent timing transpired when some of my respondents explained how one has to maintain the calendrical parallelism when carrying out various projects in a community characterized by multiple temporalities.

In the third chapter, I have opposed the ecclesiastical stance with the social articulations of the calendar debate in order to answer the initial research questions of the present paper. While the tensions between the two Metropolitanates display political overtones, in the social realm the calendar

has *become a means to express one's identity aspirations* and ideological options. In narrative terms, there are actors who defend the old style calendar mainly instantiated in the ecclesiastical representatives from the main church of Moldova, and on the other belligerent side, there is the civil society which urges upon change and standardization of time. The ecclesiastical discourse featured the argument of the intangible corpus of tradition while the social discourse circulates arguments in cultural terms, but more often, blatantly identity related. It appeared from my discussions that the emergent tradition of New style Christmas (also called European) is strongly related with the Romanian ethno-national identity against the backdrop of wishful European integration. Naturally, as liturgical metaphor at the institutional level, the calendrical parallelism is reflected through the dialectical combat between the dominant church (MM) and the pro Romanian MB. Christmas became therefore a strong identity marker for the political options. One of my informants syllogistically stated a new social rule of distinction: "Tell me what Christmas you hold and I will tell you who you are" (Cristina).

Orthodox Christendom is marked itself by inner pluralism and sensitive differences. What matters here is that a symbolic interval lags behind the standard time and that major redefinitions of the holiday and tradition are revealed in the light of these changes. One of the initial findings that intrigued me mostly and prompted this research was the overall abjuration of the soviet past and eagerness to emulate the European mode, that ultimately, this holiday is credited in civilizational terms and deemed to play such an existential role in the cultural and political project of the country. The tendency in adopting the new style dates because they are held more correct and convenient is taken as a sign of religious disenchantment and disengagement with Church. This imposed the need to question the validity of recent surveys which attest an absolute degree of trust in Church and, moreover, the general assumption that the level of religiosity is unprecedentedly high in the Easter Europe (see Naletova 2009). The new style of Christmas became a stake to be played even by those who cannot be considered religious persons: "You shout out loud that Christmas is on 25 even if you are an atheist" (Cristina).

The present thesis puts forward both a theoretical and an ethnographic contribution in the combined study of time and identity and the role of the calendar in enhancing a group identity of the

group. By showing how a practice is introduced in the social repertoire and how a new holiday date is domesticated, and moreover politically instrumentalized, it presented the state of Moldovan temporal intermezzo in which all the time understandings coexist and overlap, thus defining and reflecting once again all the other tense dilemmas in society related to nation, language, history and politics.

To decipher the complexity of this phenomenon would naturally involve a more engaged interdisciplinary research project in which a more representative number of subjects would be taken into account on an extended ethnographic timescale. I believe a combined effort of an ethnographic undertaking with a social-psychological approach to inquire into the social representation of the concurrent temporalities in Moldova would reveal richer and more substantial findings.

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