

*“It Was All that I Could Think of.”
Migration, Youth, and Folkloric Entertainment
in Rural Romania*

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Abstract: A hybrid that originated in the traditional peasant music, Romanian popular music (*muzică populară*), as it is known from radio broadcasts, TV shows or live performances from all around the country, was developed by mixing the village music of the twentieth century with techniques and principles borrowed from the classical repertoire and other light genres. *Muzica populară* emerged in the interwar years, but was perfected and regulated by the communist regime, becoming one of the favorite genres of the rural and urban working class and, nowadays, it continues to have a great appeal among all age categories. Our aim was to discover the motivations that lead the village youth of Romania to involve themselves in activities dealing with *muzica populară*, in particular, or with folklore and traditions, in general. To accomplish this, we conducted several interviews with young people from Sălaj county, from which a few patterns emerged: the rapid familiarization with the genre due to specific TV channels; the acquired taste due to grandparents raising their grandchildren in the absence of the parents who migrated in the 2000s; the expressed devotion to the local culture and their willingness and duty to preserve and promote it. We can also explain the success of *muzică populară* among young people by structural factors that are at work in the whole society, namely the lack of interest of post-communist authorities in building and/or maintaining a cultural and educational infrastructure in the rural areas. Thus, this paper aims to explore contemporary rural pop culture by considering the

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connection between the deterioration of the cultural infrastructure in rural areas, transnational migration and the exponential development of an industry devoted to the recent *muzică populară*.

Keywords: muzică populară, folklore music, folk traditions, rural youth, cultural infrastructure, transnational migration, niche TV channels.

1. Introduction

Born in the same year (1986), but raised in different social backgrounds, one in the city, the other in a village, as adolescents we shared a similar perspective on *muzică populară*.³ It appeared to us like a relic from a bygone era (the Communist regime) and a sign of backwardness and peasantness, a part of an inferior culture. We figured out that it was the music of the older generation, the generation of our parents and grandparents, and that it would slowly fade away and eventually disappear completely when these generations were to vanish. During the nineties and the first years of the next decade, there was a whole anti-peasantness and anti-*muzică populară* trend among teenagers and young people. We were very interested in urban culture and international music. Of course, there were also youngsters in the village who still enjoyed *muzică populară*, especially among those who were not able to go to high schools and universities in the nearby towns. They were “the peasants”⁴ since after graduating elementary school, they usually

³ The literal English translation would be *popular music*, but its meaning in Romanian is noticeably different from the English/American equivalent. A better term would be folkloric music, but this would create further confusions since folklore is used both for the orally transmitted peasant music and for the stage music of the professional ensembles. For this reason, we decided to keep the term *muzică populară* untranslated.

⁴ In that context, “peasant” was used (and it is still used) as a pejorative term, meaning uncivilized, backward, in opposition to those emancipated and open to a cosmopolitan culture. In a famous book on the concept of peasant, Michael Kearney discusses this: “for unlike the categorical absoluteness of the primitive, which is the primary conceptual antipode of the modern, the peasant is located on the margin—geographic, historical, and classificatory—between them. [...] Within anthropology and within peasant studies in general, ‘the peasant’ was constructed from residual images of pre-industrial European and colonial

worked in the family household (agriculture and raising animals) or were employed as construction or forest workers in the village or elsewhere in Romania. But, contrary to our expectations, not only did *muzică populară* not slowly fall out of fashion, it gained wider popularity after, during the 2000s and beyond. Moreover, it has also been adopted by many young people, rural and urban, born after the Revolution of 1989.

Beyond the research that each of us carries out on our own, our interest in folk music/*muzică populară* and the ethno-revival phenomenon of the last two decades has to do with the belief that peasant music, and peasant culture as a whole, must be detached from the nationalist-ethnicist paradigm that has been instrumentalizing and distorting them for more than a century. This paper is a first step, with preliminary results, in what we intend to be a thorough research at the end of which we intend to demonstrate that *muzică populară* is an important piece in the understanding of the contemporary Romanian village.

The aim of this paper is to explain the perpetuation and dissemination of *muzică populară* among the Romanian youth living today in the countryside. More specifically, we wanted to understand what their motivations are, not only for listening to *muzică populară*, but also for involving themselves in various activities related to folklore and tradition, or for pursuing careers as instrumentalists or singers. At the same time, we intend to explore the many ways in which transnational migration stimulated an identity and folkloric revival that led to *muzică populară's* strong adherence among the rural youth, and contributed to the development of a music and folklore entertainment industry.

With these ideas in mind, we conducted interviews with young adults and teenagers from a few villages situated in the Sălaj county (north-western Romania): Valcăul de Jos, Chieșd, Măeriște, and Marin. We were primarily interested in established or aspiring soloists, but we also worked with folk dancers and cultural animators. Our interviews were complemented by a

rural society. Informed by romantic sensibilities and modern nationalist imaginations, these images are anachronisms, but nevertheless they remain robust anachronisms even up to the end of the twentieth century." Michael Kearney, *Reconceptualizing the Peasantry. Anthropology in Global Perspective* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1996), 25.

constant ethnography of Facebook pages, groups, and profiles, in order to explore the everyday intersections between popular culture and new media.⁵

The subject of *muzică populară* has not attracted much scholarly attention. Romanian ethnomusicologists rarely mention it, and when they do, they do it only to remind the reader that it was the product of the communist regime's propaganda, a kind of social and cultural engineering, a falsification of the genuine peasant music that has no worth, and the sole mission of which was the indoctrination of the population.⁶ Sociologists, anthropologists, or historians were not much interested in the subject either. With a few exceptions⁷, they preferred to focus on other musical genres such as manele⁸, electronica⁹, rock¹⁰

⁵ David Beer, *Popular Culture and New Media, The Politics of Circulation* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 1-2.

⁶ Speranța Rădulescu, "Traditional Music and Ethnomusicology: Under Political Pressure: The Romanian Case", *Anthropology Today*, 13 (1997): 8–12; Speranța Rădulescu, *Peisaje muzicale în România secolului XX [Musical Landscapes in XXth century Romania]* (București: Editura Muzicală, 2002).

⁷ Alexandra Urdea, "Folklore Music on Romanian TV. From socialist television to private channels", *Journal of European Television, History and Culture* 3, no. 5 (2014): 35–49; Maurice Mengel, "New Folk Music as an Attempted Repatriation in Romania", in *The Oxford Handbook of Musical Repatriation*, eds. Frank Gunderson, Robert C. Lancefield and Bret D. Woods (Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁸ Victor A. Stoichiță, "Vous trouvez cela drôle? Ironie et jeux relationnels dans une musique de fête en Roumanie", *Cahiers d'ethnomusicologie* 26 (2013): 193-208; M. Beissinger, A. Giurchescu, S. Rădulescu (eds.), *Manele in Romania: Cultural Expression and Social Meaning in Balkan Popular Music* (Bowman and Littlefield 2016); Adrian Schiop, *Șmecherie și lume rea. Universul social al manelelor [Trickery and bad people. The social universe of manele]* (Chișinău: Cartier, 2017); Ruxandra Trandafiroiu, "Manele, symbolic geography and music cosmopolitanism in Romania", *Popular Music History* 11, no. 1 (2018): 61-79.

⁹ Raluca Nagy and Cristina Plecadite, "Consuming Electronic Music in Bucharest: «Low-Profile» Locations and Their Public", *Ethnologia Balkanica* 10 (2006): 317–334; Ruxandra Trandafiroiu, "A Tale of Two (or #EverMore) Festivals: Electronic Music in a Transylvanian Town," in *Eastern European Popular Music in a Transnational Context*, ed. Ewa Mazierska and Zsolt Győri (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 213-237.

¹⁰ Doru Pop, "Pop-Rock and Propaganda During the Ceaușescu Regime in Communist Romania", in *Popular Music in Eastern Europe. Breaking the Cold War Paradigm*, ed. Ewa Mazierska (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 51-67; Caius Dobrescu, *The Phoenix that could not rise. Rock culture in Romania, 1960–1989* (Amsterdam: Brill, 2011).

or pop music in general.¹¹ The absence of dedicated studies is even more surprising since *muzică populară* has a respectable age and a significant fan base, being at least as popular as the aforementioned genres.

2. *Muzica populară*: definition, brief history, and its current status

Muzică populară is a hybrid between Romanian peasant music and Western art music harmonic, contrapuntal, and orchestration techniques. Its actual design comes from the early days of the communist regime, but its origins can be traced to the interwar period. In a way, we can say that *muzică populară* is "the stage version" of the orally transmitted village music. Its shape, as we know it today, was designed in the second half of the twentieth century, and its features are, to various degrees, still identifiable today. One of the most significant changes that it operated was the creation of a new type of ensemble. Unlike the small (and almost exclusively) instrumental groups that were responsible for dance music all over the country, the new music was performed by a much larger collective: the instrumental section was extended and disposed of according to the principles of the symphonic orchestra, with melody and accompaniment compartments, grouped by instrument family (violin, viola, cello, clarinet, trumpet, panpipe, accordion, cymbal, drum, double bass); in many cases, the instrumental ensemble was joined by a dance group; in front of all these, there was a soloist (singer or instrumentalist, male or female). Sometimes, the music consisted of arrangements of genuine folk tunes, but most of the time, the songs were composed by professionals trying to replicate peasant music and also to transform it into a superior artistic expression. Not only was the music elaborated according to a general pattern (lively, up-tempo melodies with an optimistic character), but its lyrics were often used to praise the Party, its leadership, or the remarkable achievements of the Communist regime.

¹¹ Claudiu Constantin Oancea, "Popular Music and Official Culture in 1980s Socialist Romania", in *New Europe College Yearbook* (2016-2017): 165-195; Elena Trifan "The Romanian music scene: The social economy of pop music in the post-socialist period", in *Eastern European Music Industries and Policies after the Fall of Communism. From State Control to Free Market*, ed. Patryk Galuszka (Routledge, 2021), 155-171.

Although Romanian ethnomusicologists usually refer to *muzică populară* as a strategy used by the socialist state to distort and replace the traditional music of the villages, the careful design of this genre was justified by Marxist philosophy of history: being a part of a society's superstructure, folk music was supposed to evolve as a result of the changes that took place within the base of a society.¹² Thus, *muzică populară* could be seen as the natural outcome of the transition from a capitalist to a socialist mode of production that happened in Romania from 1947 onwards. As such, it had to embody all the achievements of the new socialist state and to deliver higher satisfaction for the "new man". But, besides the theoretical justifications, *muzică populară* was a far-reaching vehicle for state propaganda, recent research accurately describing it as state representation music.¹³ To successfully fulfil this role, it had to be a compelling product, to offer grandiose shows of a repertoire from each of the country's ethnographic regions. This was achieved through a strictly controlled performance, in which a conductor and a choreographer decided all the details. As a result, all the variation and improvisation inherent in a rural band were eliminated. Moreover, the music of the folk orchestra is often polished with classical music related effects, such as frequent and uncommon chord changes, tremolos and uncommon legato for violins, striking dynamic contrasts, literate arrangements with dialogues and countermelodies between different groups of instruments.¹⁴ These improvements applied to the peasant music were meant to demonstrate the superiority of *muzică populară* as the result of a superior form of social organization, and to advance this genre closer to the ideal of Western art music.¹⁵

Being the state-sanctioned form of folk music, *muzică populară* was widely disseminated through radio and TV programs. Folk music and dance

¹² Theodor Constantiniu, "Folklore and Dialectical Materialism. A case study of Ethnomusicological Research in Communist Romania", *Studia UBB Musica*, 65, no. 2 (2020): 263.

¹³ Rădulescu, *Peisaje muzicale*, 85.

¹⁴ Rădulescu, *Peisaje muzicale*, 84.

¹⁵ Constantiniu, "Folklore and Dialectical Materialism", 264. For a similar discussion of folk orchestras in Eastern Europe see Donna Buchanan, "Metaphors of Power, Metaphors of Truth: The Politics of Music Professionalism in Bulgarian Folk Orchestras", *Ethnomusicology*, 39, no. 3 (1995): 381-416; Jennifer R. Cash, "Reviving Moldova: Social and Political Dimensions of Contemporary Folkloric Performances", *The Anthropology of East Europe Review*, 22, no. 1 (2004): 61-76.

ensembles were a regular presence in the rural and urban houses of culture, in different festivities and celebrations, and in festivals and contests held at a local, regional, or national level. Due to its spectacular design (large groups of performers wearing standardized traditional costumes, synchronized dance moves and instrumental playing, virtuosity and technical skill, celebrity singers) and the prestige that the state endowed it with, this genre was readily embraced by large segments of the population. Most of them were peasants or members of the new urban working class who had strong ties with the village. For the general public, there was no clear boundary between *muzică populară* and the traditional music of the rural communities, but rather a continuity. Soon, *muzică populară* became synonymous with folk music and was considered as a representative of the Romanian musical tradition. The peasants¹⁶ themselves internalized the standards of the folkloric spectacles and began to evaluate their own musical performances in relation to the model put forward by the more prestigious *muzică populară*.

After the fall of the Communist regime in 1989, the fate of this genre was similar to that of the entire pop industry.¹⁷ In the first few years, it continued the same path out of inertia, with the same radio and TV shows, the same soloists, ensembles, promoters, and performance venues. However, the new political and economic climate favoured, beginning with the late 90s, the steady expansion of an industry of *muzică populară*. In the context of a market economy, the state lost its monopoly over the music industry but, in the case of *muzică populară*, it continued to fund music and dance ensembles in each county, to organize concerts, festivals, and contests (via subordinate institutions such as national radio and television, town halls or county councils). But, along with the state's continuing role in supporting this music, the industry was constantly developing due to the growing number of aspiring artists and to the private initiatives in establishing recording studios, record labels, radio stations and TV channels exclusively (or almost exclusively) dedicated to *muzică populară*. The demand for this type of music increased: it was popular at weddings or other family

¹⁶ By peasants, we refer here to the individuals that live in rural areas, living from agriculture and wage labour in the village, in the nearby cities or abroad, but who present/represent themselves as peasants, although they are living in a post-peasant society. For a more extensive discussion of the evolution of the concept of the peasant, see Kearney, *Reconceptualizing the Peasantry*.

¹⁷ Trifan, "The Romanian music scene", 158.

celebrations, listened to during public festivities, TV, or radio broadcasts. This interest led to the prominence of a multitude of singers ready to perform in all these settings, with a repertoire diverse enough to accommodate various demands (in the absence of the socialist state's strict supervision, the artists can now freely choose the songs and the style they want to perform) and able to gather a small or medium instrumental group to accompany them.

3. The factors that contribute to the popularity of *muzică populară*

Faced with a larger and more diverse offer, the public continued to support the genre and to enjoy it live, on TV, or on the internet. For all these people, *muzică populară* is a musical genre which they still associate with the country's traditional culture and with the symbolic construct of a Romanian national identity, which presents the peasant as the repository of the "spirit of the nation" - and the peasant culture as the national culture *par excellence*.¹⁸ Seen from the perspective of the evolution of *muzică populară* and folkloristic entertainment, the rural world became, after 2000, the subject of a "synthetic traditionalism". The concept of traditional synthetic is used by anthropologist Florin Dumitrescu in relation to the advertising industry and consumer products, defined as "traditional" in order to describe a "mimicked character, reconstituted in factory conditions and widely distributed."¹⁹ This kind of synthetic tradition is what characterizes the folk entertainment industry: televisions, radios, production studios and a whole network of events and contests design their programs and promotion campaigns with a mixture of *neosămănătorism*,²⁰ traditionalism, and urban pop culture with thick touches of glamor.

¹⁸ Valer Simion Cosma, "Inventing the Romanian Peasant in Transylvania during the Nineteenth Century." In *Ruralism and Literature in Romania*, eds. Ștefan Baghiu, Vlad Pojoga, Maria Sass (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2019).

¹⁹ Florin Dumitrescu, *Tradiții la superofertă. Între socoteala din agenție și cea de la raft [Traditions on super offer. Between the agency and the shelf price]* (București: Cartier, 2015), 12.

²⁰ By this term we mean an approach to the peasant world and its culture in a manner dominated by romanticism, *passéisme*, and idyllicism, reinforcing a fake opposition between rurality and modernity. This concept refers to *sămănătorism*, a political and aesthetic direction from the first decades of the twentieth century in Romania. See Zigu Ornea, *Sămănătorismul* (Bucharest: Fundația Culturală Română, 1998).

The last decade witnessed the increasing interest, within the social sciences, for analysis of the neoliberal transformations in the former communist countries.²¹ That led to the examination of the reforms implemented in Romania,²² along with their social and cultural impact. These economic and political transformations have been "embedded in cultural formations and (...) appropriated by the subjects through a wide range of popular practices, narratives and perspectives on how we need to rethink our self and daily life in new socio-economic contexts. The issue of professional and personal success, competitiveness and entrepreneurship, specific to capitalist society, is an essential element of these cultural legitimacies"²³ and a central part of a popular culture based on a "business ontology" that has become hegemonic especially in the last decade.²⁴ This hegemony is also visible in the *muzică populară* industry

²¹ Vladimir Pasti, *Noul capitalism românesc* [*New Romanian Capitalism*] (Iași: Polirom, 2006); Daniela Gabor, *Central Banking and Financialization. A Romanian Account of How Eastern Europe Became Subprime*, (Springer: 2010); David A. Kideckel, *România postsocialistă. Munca, trupul și cultura clasei muncitoare* [*Post-socialist Romania. Work, the body and class culture*] (Iași: Polirom, 2010); Cornel Ban, *Dependență și dezvoltare. Economia politică a capitalismului românesc* [*Addiction and development. The political economy of Romanian capitalism*] (Cluj-Napoca: Tact, 2014); Cornel Ban, *Ruling Ideas. How Global Neoliberalism Goes Local* (Oxford University Press, 2016); Florin Poenaru, *Locuri comune. Clasă, anticomunism, stânga* [*Common places. Class, Anti-communism, the Left*] (Cluj-Napoca: Tact, 2017); Cătălin Augustin Stoica, *România Continuă. Schimbare și adaptare în comunism și postcomunism* [*Romania Continues. Change and adaptation in communism and post-communism*] (București: Humanitas, 2018).

²² These reforms aimed at Romania's transition to a market economy and have been implemented in the last three decades, with moments of radicalization at the end of the nineties and at the end of the following decade. Once the direction was established, the reforms were gradually normalized and assumed by all the political parties that ruled in different formulas, aiming by multiple means to facilitate large capital investments and deregulate the labor market. The financial crisis of 2008-2009 amplifies the asymmetry between capital and labor, the solution chosen by the rulers of that time being an even stronger deregulation of the labor market, in the sense of labor flexibility. The measures have had a major impact on making workers more precarious and intensifying their feelings of insecurity about their jobs. See Sorin Gog, Anca Simionca, "Introducere [Introduction]", *Noile subiectivități ale capitalismului global. Spiritualitate, dezvoltare personală și transformări neoliberale în România*. [*The new subjectivities of global capitalism. Spirituality, personal development and neoliberal transformations in Romania*] Sorin Gog, Anca Simionca, eds. (Cluj-Napoca: Tact, 2020) 10-11.

²³ Gog, Simionca, "Introducere", 13.

²⁴ Mark Fisher, *Capitalism Realism. Is There No Alternative?* (Hampshire: Zero Books, 2009) 17.

and among the youth participating in this category of entertainment, both as artists and consumers.

If we want to explain the success of this music in the post socialist years, we have to take into account the evolution of both supply and demand that shaped the industry of *muzică populară* in the context of the economic, political, social and cultural transformations of the last three decades. We chose to examine two of the most important factors of this relationship, namely the establishment of niche television channels (on the side of supply) and the Romanians' massive transnational migration (on the side of demand).

3.1. *Niche television and radio stations*

After the fall of communism, cable television rapidly expanded throughout the country, fostering the establishment of local private media initiatives. The first TV channel dedicated to folk music, Etno TV, first aired in 2002 and was owned by a controversial politician and businessman. In the next decade, several similar initiatives emerged: Favorit TV (2004), Taraf TV (2005, dedicated exclusively to *manele*), Hora TV (2008, a regional television, running in Transylvania, based in Zalău, Sălaj county). Along with the TV channels, there are also radio stations: Antena Satelor (mostly with *muzică populară* and, since 2006, with national coverage), Radio Someș and Radio Balada, both with regional coverage.

The appearance of these niche TV stations marked a shift in the way the public of *muzică populară* was conceived: while in the communist years the broadcasts of the national television (TVR) were addressed to the whole nation (as the shows themselves intended to portray the nation), in post-communism, cable TV allowed the targeting a segment of the population without the need to appeal to the entire nation.²⁵ In the new context, niche television had to tailor its programs to respond to the requirements of its target audience, without being too concerned with questions of musical style and "authenticity". Thus, TV stations dedicated to *muzică populară* evolved in the middle ground between the strictly regulated folklore of the communist period and the glamour and

²⁵ Urdea, "Folklore Music on Romanian TV", 41-42.

consumerism of the free market.²⁶ Although targeted to a specific public, niche television channels still equate the shows of *muzică populară* with the premodern village, with its traditions and culture, and with the *nation* at large. In general, the artists and the public continue to assume the same claims of "authenticity" made in the previous regime, claims that contribute to the legitimation of this genre as representative for a Romanian identity. As a distinct musical genre, *muzică populară* is shaped by television, because "through television, we see a particular articulation of the genre, from the last decades of communism to the period of niche television channels."²⁷

Presented with a generous TV offer, Romanians do not hold back from making the most of it. According to European statistics, they are among the top TV consumers (in number of hours spent watching TV) on the continent. Since 2007, the Romanians watching television daily counted for approximately 90% of the total population, with a notable decrease only in 2018 to 79%. When asked to name their favourite cultural broadcast on TV, most of the respondents mentioned the *muzică populară* and ethno music shows, or programmes dedicated to rural subjects and problems.²⁸ Although radio listening decreased since 2007 (from 2007 to 2019 there are 27% less households with a radio), the preferences of the listeners are also directed towards *muzică populară* and ethno.²⁹ The Romanians' appetite for folkloric entertainment is undeniable and the niche TV stations established after 2000 have capitalized on it, and also contributed to its satisfaction and propagation. However, as the statistics demonstrate, the patterns of musical consumption were continually diversifying in the 2006-2016 decade: if in 2006 *muzică populară*, ethno, Romanian light music³⁰ and *manele* dominated the top of the most listened to genres, with high

²⁶ Urdea, "Folklore Music on Romanian TV", 43.

²⁷ Urdea, "Folklore Music on Romanian TV", 49.

²⁸ Ioana Ceobanu, Anda Becuț Marinescu, "Consumul de conținut media la TV și Radio. Preferințe și așteptări [Consumption of media content on TV and Radio. Preferences and expectations], Carmen Croitoru and Anda Becuț Marinescu (coord.) *Barometrul de consum cultural 2019. Experiența și practicile culturale de timp liber*, [Cultural Consumption Barometer 2019. Cultural leisure experience and practices]. (București: Universul Academic, 2020), 98-99.

²⁹ Ceobanu and Becuț Marinescu, "Consumul de conținut media", 105.

³⁰ The expression "light music" is used here to describe the type of pop music that was common in Romania before 1989. This genre was aired on radio and television and produced the first generations of celebrity pop stars.

percentages and at great distance above the other genres, such as Romanian and Western pop, classical or blues gradually make their way into the rankings, sometimes with percentages close to those at the top.³¹

3.2. *Transnational Migration*

At first glance, the association between migration, the countryside and *muzică populară* leads us to think that the lyricists and composers involved in the music production of the last two decades have allocated a generous space to migration and the way the migrants deal with working abroad, with their longing for home and the various hardships they face. Whether we refer to *manele*, or to ethno music, or to the wider category of *muzică populară*, migration is present as a topic in many songs, even in some very well-known ones, developing a rich repertoire over time. In addition, the consolidation over the last two decades of some Romanian communities in different areas of Spain, Italy, Germany, and other countries has determined the constant organization of tours with famous and popular Romanian artists.

But beyond these somehow obvious aspects, migration has marked the production and consumption of *muzică populară* in other ways, being one of the processes that have shaped and are still shaping the local rural worlds and Romanian society in multiple ways and on multiple layers. With the lifting of visas for Romanian citizens, in the context of negotiations for Romania's accession to the European Union, external migration increases exponentially. Leaving to work abroad became the main or the only solution for those who found themselves jobless in the context of deindustrialization and shock therapy that pervaded the second half of the nineties.³² In 2005, the level of remittances increased more than 35 times compared to the previous period

³¹ Anda Becuț, Elena Trifan, "Practici și preferințe contemporane de consum în muzică și dans" [Contemporary consumption practices and preferences in music and dance], Carmen Croitoru, Anda Becuț (coord.), *Barometrul de consum cultural 2016. O radiografiere a practicilor de consum cultural* [Cultural Consumption Barometer 2016. An X-ray of cultural consumption practices] (București: Pro Universitaria, 2017), 253.

³² István Horváth, "The Culture of Migration of Rural Romanian Youth," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 34:5 (2008), 775-777; Cornel Ban, *Dependență și dezvoltare*, 163-165; David A. Kideckel, *România Postsocialistă*, 67-77.

(1999-2004), when external migration was significantly lower.³³ According to Dumitru Sandu, in the first two decades, more than a third of Romania's households, about 2.5 million, had at least one member abroad and about one-fifth of households had at least one member who worked abroad.³⁴ For the rural youth of the last two decades, who grew up in a society deeply dominated by the culture of migration, an episode of migration has become the ritual of entering adulthood,³⁵ replacing the military stage or the employment in the local labour market.

When migration became a mass phenomenon, rural administrations began to organize festivities during the summer as a way of gathering the community and preserving the local identity. During these holidays, along with dance and pop music, *muzică populară* and almost everything related to folklore and traditions played an essential role, being an impetus for the organization or re-establishment of local folk-dance ensembles. This category of events has contributed to the development of networks and has come to play an important role in the evolution of the folk entertainment industry, becoming, along with radio and TV channels, ramps for launching young talents and a way to see the famous stars of *muzică populară* live. In other words, transnational migration has contributed to the development of a new market for music consumption through communities abroad (from CDs to tours) and has funded domestic consumption and industry, both through community events organized in villages and towns, as well as through the

³³ Dumitru Sandu, *Lumile sociale ale migrației* [Social worlds of migration] (Iași: Polirom, 2010) 15; Dumitru Sandu, "Migrația temporară în străinătate." [Temporary migration abroad] *Demografia României* [Romania's demography], Vasile Ghețău ed. (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române, 2018) 248.

³⁴ See Dumitru Sandu, *Lumile sociale* (2010) 84, 87, 92, 100, 101; Dumitru Sandu "Migrația temporară" (2018) 248-249; Ciprian Iftimoei, Ionuț Cristian Baciu "Analiza statistică a migrației externe după aderarea României la Uniunea Europeană," [Statistical analysis of external migration after Romania's accession to the European Union] *Romanian Statistical Review - Supplement No. 12* (Bucharest, 2018) 174; *Anuarul Statistic al României/Romanian Statistical Yearbook*, Tudorel Andrei ed. (Bucharest: Institutul Național de Statistică, 2018).

³⁵ István Horváth, "The Culture of Migration" 773-774, 782; Alexandra Voivozeanu, "I wanted to see how to make money there too": Mobility strategies of Romanian seasonal workers in the agricultural sector abroad," *Social Change Review* Vol. 18, (Winter 2020) 13-38.

investments made by parents in supporting musical careers for their children and the spending of considerable sums through parties related to events such as weddings, baptisms or coming of age parties.

Numerous sociological and anthropological research on the effects of transnational migration on rural communities have highlighted as main consequences the depopulation of villages, the aging population and the development in the last two decades of a generation of children raised in transnational families,³⁶ with one or both parents working abroad for longer or shorter periods of time. Interviews conducted in the last three years in villages from Sălaj and Bistrița-Năsăud counties highlighted the frequent cases of children raised by grandparents. For them, *muzică populară* was a constant presence on television or radio in the grandparents' homes during their childhood and adolescence. For many youngsters it was a way to become familiar with this musical genre and its constantly evolving repertoire. As we could observe from the interviews, the strong connection created between young people and grandparents in such contexts gave a nostalgic touch and a deeply emotional value to this musical genre.

Last but not least, the depopulation and aging of the rural population, as a major effect of migration, has contributed in a substantial way to the degradation of the cultural and educational infrastructure in many localities. In many villages, the merger of schools during the right-wing government led by Emil Boc (2009-2012) due to the decrease in the number of students was complemented by the disappearance of activities in cultural centers, where they had not already been ruined. The last two decades have strengthened the status of the rural world as a reservoir of natural and human resources for the local and global economy³⁷ and partially as a space for urban escapism and daydreaming for the urban middle class.

³⁶ Janka Vogel, "Transnational Romanian Families." In *Bitter Things, Narratives and Memories of Transnational Families*, Malve Lippmann, Can Sungu, Maike Suhr, eds. (Berlin: Archive Books, 2018); Iulia-Elena Hossu, "Familia Transnațională – reprezentare și practici," *Transilvania* No. 2 (Sibiu, 2019): 71-80.

³⁷ Norbert Petrovici, "Neoliberal Proletarianization along the Rural-Urban Divide in Postsocialist Romania," *Studia UBB Sociologia*, LVIII, 2 (2013): 23-54.

3.3. *Technology and social media*

As a continuation of the revolution started by the emergence of television and radio stations dedicated to *muzică populară* and traditions, especially in the last decade, the internet has gained a growing role, becoming fundamental to music consumption and the promotion of music productions and videos. Gadgets such as mobile phones and laptops connected to the Internet have become increasingly accessible and their use by all age groups has been boosted by migration, as evidenced by interviews conducted in recent years in Sălaj and Bistrița-Năsăud on how to keep in touch with those at home, especially children and the elderly. However, in addition to the essential role in facilitating communication with those who have left and maintaining contact with the native community through Facebook groups, people from villages, mainly the youngsters, "are engaging with culture via these new media forms as they enchant, distract, entertain, reveal and occupy."³⁸

Mobility and hybridity are two main features of globalization, and as John Storey stated, globalized culture is clearly undermining what had been a key aspect in intellectual discussions of folk culture, that is, that being embedded in a particular space – the rural – and separated by both time and space from the development of modern urban and industrial life guaranteed "authenticity." The movement of people and commodities around the globe, bringing the global into the local, clearly challenges the idea that locality can fix the boundaries of a culture. The nomadic nature of global cultures suggests we are witnessing a shift in how we see cultures, a shift from culture as "roots" to culture as "routes."³⁹ Through new media, the youth from the villages explore and promote its folklore and tradition, both for a local and a global public, becoming part of a global market of traditions and world music. New media, such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, allows the young rural artists to promote their activity and to be in contact with followers and other artists, expanding their popularity far beyond the village and country boundaries. Given the collapse of cultural infrastructure in most rural

³⁸ David Beer, *Popular Culture and New Media*, 1.

³⁹ John Storey, *Inventing Popular Culture. From Folklore to Globalization* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 117.

communities (libraries, cultural centres, clubs), new media has become the main source of cultural consumption and the main means of promoting one's own artistic activity. An important role is played by those who have gone abroad, often very active on Facebook local groups and very interested in following what is happening "at home" through the category of young trendsetters/influencers who constantly produce content for their pages.

All the people we interviewed in our research are using the internet and various social media platforms to promote their work. P.T. was the administrator of a Facebook page dedicated to her village, Marin, where she uploaded photos of the village and its people. Her work had a great impact among the migrants from Marin working abroad, who began to ask her for photos with their relatives at home. That motivated her to develop her activity into planning and organizing folk events for the entire community. S.H. is involved in multiple projects related to folklore, but he is also active on TikTok where he receives paid requests from other members of the platform to create rhythmic shouts on certain topics. A.P. is a pharmacy student who wishes to launch a YouTube channel containing short comedy films inspired by the life of a "traditional" peasant community. She seemed convinced that this type of folk entertainment will be very successful: "Facebook will explode, believe me!" Thus, social media is not only a platform for promoting customs and traditions. Young people intend to use it at its full capacity, to acquire social and economic capital, to monetize its content.

4. Why people get involved with *muzică populară* and traditions

In our field research, we questioned not only young people interested in a career as a singer of *muzică populară*, but also people who got involved in various activities dealing with folk music and/or traditions: collecting traditional costumes, being an extra in *muzică populară* videos, radio host for *muzică populară* broadcasts, or planner and promoter for re-enactments of various folk traditions. We wanted to learn about what motivated them to engage in all these activities. Their reasons could provide us with a better understanding of the value system that they adopted or that was adopted by the communities they live in.

For R.S. (13) and D.C. (11), two young girls that study music and already sing *muzică populară* in concerts, contests and on TV, the motivation for their passion is fairly simple and straightforward: they showed early signs of musical talent, stimulated by music heard on TV (mostly channels dedicated exclusively to *muzică populară* such as Hora TV). Their parents wasted no time and enrolled the little girls in music lessons in the nearby town of Zalău: "She was a little girl... she was 4 or 5 years old. Our TV was running mostly on Hora TV... and she was dancing, singing. So we said «let's try»" (D.C.'s father). For M.S. (21), music was an interest that she discovered in her childhood, but she settled on *muzică populară* only later, at about 14 years old. That was because "it [*muzică populară*] is the only one that still carries... the idea of the authentic Romanian way of feeling [...] And it's also more complex... so it seems to me... in costume, you need to have a certain conduct."

S.H., a young man in his early twenties from Măieriște, is a collector of traditional artifacts and a cultural animator in his village. He says that his love for folklore started as a little boy, when he discovered that he enjoyed "everything antique." His friend, C. (19), joined a folk dance group when she was 9 years old after she tried to imitate at home the dances seen on TV. Together with S.H., they started a dance ensemble in Măieriște because they wanted to "keep the traditions" (C.) and because they had "a love for the traditions" (S.H.). F.S. (41) from Valcău started to collect traditional costumes because of her "longing for grandparents, a longing for the grandparents' house." Out of this feeling, she amassed a considerable number of costumes, pieces of furniture, household items, and decorations, all gathered in a traditional house that was bought and reassembled in the backyard of her family's house. Her daughter F.S. (12) inherited her interest in folk costumes because she was attracted by the beauty of these pieces of clothing. P.T. (24) was, for a few years during high school and college, the planner and promoter of a series of events that centred around the faithful re-enactment of a traditional wedding and other collective activities such as group work and bees. Her choice for folk culture was motivated by her fascination for traditional costumes and was encouraged by members of her family. On the other hand, far beyond the villages, and among the local and national cultural institutions, the idea that traditions and folklore are the only grids through which the cultural life of the villages manifests itself is widespread.

5. The lack of cultural infrastructure

We see that the motivations mentioned by our subjects are either anchored by an aesthetic criterion (the beauty of the traditional attire or the beauty of the local customs and traditions) or on a moral duty to ensure that the (beautiful) tradition is kept alive and safeguarded. Although they represent reasonable justifications, we believe that these types of answers are just the surface level of a more complex explanation. If we want to understand the growing interest in folklore and traditions among the rural youth as a wide ranging, national phenomenon, we must search for the structural causes identifiable irrespective of the residence or the aesthetic criteria of those involved in such activities. We claim that one such structural cause is the lack of cultural infrastructure in the Romanian villages. This is a subject that some of our interviewees touched upon, without naming it directly as one of their motivations.

Except for Valcău de Jos, where there is a traditional dance group for schoolchildren and for Marin, where an NGO organized in the last few years a summer camp for children, the rest of the villages in our fieldwork offered no extracurricular cultural activities for the youth. The local authorities may sometimes be receptive to the villagers' cultural initiatives (such as when the mayor from Valcău de Jos accepted F.S.'s proposition to provide the money for a new dance instructor for the children), but usually they don't offer much support for cultural activities. S.H. mentions that, when working with his folkloric ensemble, "the town hall didn't help us with anything" and, in order to succeed in his initiatives, he had to ask for the support of the community.

All the people that we spoke with and that were attending various forms of musical training had to commute significant distances to the nearby towns of Zalău, Șimleu or Jibou in order to benefit from specialized training. R.S. has to commute from Marin to Zalău (28 km) for her folk singing and dancing classes. O.S. and F.S. from Valcău de Jos also go to Zalău (33 km) for violin and piano lessons. Their mother complained that, because of the parents' long working hours, "the situation got very busy and we couldn't handle it anymore". After finishing his workday in the evening, the father

had to drive the girls to Zalău; "when they get home it is already midnight". The mother's hope is for her older daughter, F.S. (18), to get her driver's license so she can take over the task of transportation. C. enrolled in folk dancing classes when she was 9 years old; to attend the rehearsals, she had to travel 40 minutes by train from her village Bocșa to the nearby town of Jibou. D.C., on the other hand, lives in Zalău with her parents, but commutes weekly, for the last three years, to Baia Mare (in Maramureș county, the northern neighbor of Sălaj) for private singing lessons.

Being an aspiring musician in Romania is not necessarily an affordable option, but the costs rise even more if you live in a village. Besides the costs of traveling to some urban centres, there is money to be spent on other expenses as well. The tuition is not free, not even in some public institutions (for R.S.'s classes at the Popular School of Art her parents have to pay a non-negligible sum of money). The private lessons are more expensive, but the parents agree to pay for them if the teacher is noted for his/her proficiency or is an acknowledged performer of *muzică populară*. Adding to the cost of tuition are the expenses required by the technical equipment and/or instruments: microphones, speakers, amplifiers. On top of that, and arguably the most expensive, are the costs of recording a song, filming a music video, promoting it and getting it to be aired on television stations dedicated to *muzică populară*. A common and well-known practice of all these niche TV stations is to charge the performers who wish to promote their video clips on TV. They also charge for the participation of the performers (at least the lesser-known ones) in their daily programs.

The first problem when talking about the cultural infrastructure is that a conclusive statistic on this topic is still a *desideratum*.⁴⁰ There is no clear evidence of the cultural resources available in rural Romania, but there is a consensus between experts and officials that this type of infrastructure is

⁴⁰ Carmen Croitoru, Bogdan Pălici, and George Dinu, "Infrastructura publică și impactul social al culturii" [Public infrastructure and the social impact of culture], in Carmen Croitoru, Anda Becuț (coord.), *Barometrul de consum cultural 2016. O radiografiere a practicilor de consum cultural* [Cultural Consumption Barometer 2016. An X-ray of cultural consumption practices] (București: Pro Universitaria, 2017), 31.

degrading. A study about the cultural infrastructure elaborated in 2014 for the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration mentions a few evolution tendencies prevailing in this field: the degradation of this infrastructure, especially in villages and small towns; its use for other purposes than it was intended; the absence of investments; diminished spending for its maintenance and development.⁴¹ The number of public libraries decreased between 2007 and 2015 all over the country, including the rural libraries, which were reduced from 2635 to 2052. In Sălaj county there are 61 public libraries for 239534 inhabitants. The number of cinemas also dropped significantly, from 4637 in 1990 to 81 in 2012.⁴² The rural institution designed to promote cultural activity, the community centre, is missing from approximately 21% of the Romanian villages.⁴³ Where they exist, they lack proper equipment, and they were closed or used for other ends.⁴⁴

One of the most important outcomes of this continual deterioration of the rural cultural infrastructure is the constantly increasing gap between urban and rural access to culture. Studies and reports show that the cultural offer in the countryside is quasi-inexistent.⁴⁵ Research demonstrates a direct link between participation in cultural events and the available cultural infrastructure: people living in an area with multiple elements of cultural infrastructure are more likely to participate in cultural events than those living in a place with no or very limited such infrastructure.⁴⁶ Thus, the scores obtained for activities such as singing, playing an instrument, dancing, writing (prose, poetry, essay), taking photos, painting, drawing, handicraft

⁴¹ Irina Popescu-Criveanu et al., *Strategia de Dezvoltare Teritorială a României. Studii de fundamentare. Studiul 21. Infrastructuri culturale [Territorial Development Strategy of Romania. Studies on the foundations. Study 21. Cultural Infrastructures]* (2014), 59.

⁴² Popescu-Criveanu et al., *Strategia de Dezvoltare*, 28, 37.

⁴³ Croitoru, Pălici, Dinu, "Infrastructura publică", 47.

⁴⁴ Popescu-Criveanu et al., *Infrastructuri culturale*, 59.

⁴⁵ Iulian Oană, "Accesul la cultură și beneficiile asociate" [Access to culture and associated benefits], Carmen Croitoru and Anda Becuț Marinescu (coord.) *Barometrul de Consum Cultural 2018. Dinamica sectorului cultural în Anul Centenarului Marii Uniri*, [Barometrul de Consum Cultural 2018. Dinamica sectorului cultural în Anul Centenarului Marii Uniri] (București: Universul Academic, 2019), 131.

⁴⁶ Oană, "Accesul la cultură", 131.

are constantly lower for the rural residents than for the urban residents.⁴⁷ The abandonment of the residents of the small towns and villages is considered by some researchers as a violation of the fundamental right of access to culture guaranteed by law.⁴⁸

Despite the scarce resources, the youth are eager to participate in what cultural activities are available, and most of them are related to folk music and dance. When he started his traditional dance ensemble, S.H. didn't need to search too long for members, they came by themselves, without him having to ask. In working to organize her events in Marin, P.T. was helped by about 30 teenagers and approximately 20 adults from the village. She says that the folkloric re-enactments attracted the interest of the youth to such an extent that those living abroad with their parents were planning their summer holidays depending on the date of these events. Those living in the village tried to extend this summer activity all year long by shooting various small-scale re-enactments of different traditions, wearing traditional costumes and creating their own scripts. Both these initiatives proved to be very popular among the villagers: S.H. estimates that his ensemble's first public performance gathered around 400 spectators, the community centre's hall proving to not be large enough for those who wished to see the show; at her first wedding re-enactment, P.T. speaks about more than 300 people that were present in the audience and the number of the spectators was similar for as long as she organized this type of event.

In this context, the choice for all types of folkloric entertainment is the natural outcome of the combination of two factors: the lack of cultural infrastructure and the willingness of the rural population to participate in or to consume cultural events. With no options available, the people have, most of the time, to organize themselves and the only (or one of the few) forms of cultural expression revolves around the folk music and dances that are intensely promoted on TV and online and with which they were associated

⁴⁷ Ioana Ceobanu, Anda Becuț Marinescu, "Relația dintre cultură și educație", in *Barometrul de Consum Cultural 2018*, 180.

⁴⁸ Carmen Croitoru, Anda Becuț Marinescu, "Artele spectacolului. Infrastructură și bariere de consum", in *Barometrul de Consum Cultural 2018*, 107.

with for a long period of time. The preference for folk entertainment is, thus, due to an unquestioned automatism that hasn't been challenged by alternative modes of artistic and cultural activity and that cannot be challenged without massive state intervention dedicated to the development of a widespread network of rural cultural infrastructure. When explaining her motivations, P.T. mentioned this narrow imaginary horizon that she experienced living as a teenager in Marin: "I was seventeen when I thought of organizing an event [...] and I didn't know what else... I didn't know something else could exist, that other possibilities are available. It was all that I could think of."

Conclusions

Muzica populară is a version of peasant folk music designed for the citizen of a modern, industrialized society, a citizen maybe with rural origins, but who lives his life in a society completely different from that referenced in this musical genre. In this paper, we tried to explain why young people from Romanian villages are still listening to and enjoying this genre in a time when the landscape of pop music is so large and so readily available. To understand the success of *muzică populară* we need to understand the transition process from a communist society and a planned economy to a liberal democracy and the free market as a process that integrated Romania as a semiperiphery in the world system of division of labour. For the most part of the population, this was equivalent to privatisation, austerity, deregulation and, as a result, transnational migration. The migratory experience has an important role in the perpetuation of *muzică populară* as the music of choice for many of the rural and urban working class: it is the music that expresses their local and national identity and allows them to connect to the culture of their homeland. This demand for *muzică populară* was readily met by TV stations dedicated to this genre established at a time when the first migratory waves were in progress. These niche stations capitalized on the popularity of the genre by claiming to present "authentic" Romanian music, while at the same time upholding loose standards for what a proper musical performance should look like.

In our opinion, one of the most important factors that contributes to the involvement of the youth in activities related to traditions and *muzică populară* is, besides migration and also a result of the transition process mentioned above, the absence (or the de-structuring of the cultural infrastructure in Romanian villages. Our interviews documented eagerness among the rural youth for different forms of artistic expression such as music, dance, acting. But if they want to get involved in such activities, they find no opportunities in the village and they have to go to nearby towns in order to get specialized training. Having no affordable alternatives locally, they organize themselves, choosing the only cultural expressions that they are accustomed with (from watching TV with their grandparents or from the rare occasions of a village festivity): the show of *muzică populară*.

While there is no reason to disregard the cultural initiatives of our subjects, the prevalence of folkloric events and the absence of affordable alternatives can also have undesirable outcomes such as the unwillingness to participate in a multicultural setting or to accept other, non-Romanian, artistic expression. P.T. mentioned that, when she suggested the inclusion of a Ukrainian dance group in the folk re-enactments that she organized, her collaborators were reluctant to accept, objecting that the dances "were not Romanian". The same reluctance was displayed when P. T. tried to include other musical genres apart from *muzică populară* and *manele* fancied by other teenagers from Marin who volunteered to help her. This comes as no surprise, but rather as a confirmation of the role that *muzică populară* played in the symbolic construction of the nation under the communist regime and its continuous use in the perpetuation of nationalism and autochthonism, in stirring the "pride of being a Romanian". But, if ethnocentrism is to become dominant among the rural population or the Romanian society at large, it is not *muzică populară* to blame, but the absence of coherent developmental policies able to reduce the economic and cultural gap between the Romanian cities and villages, and also the absence of the staging of folk music and folklore events outside a nationalist, ethnicist setting.

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