Abstract: Drawing on a corpus of reader comments posted to the news reports about the “Colectiv” fire on the Gândul daily website, this article investigates how “the void signifier” People is disputed between ideological and mythical thought in a moment of political and societal crisis. The comments were made by readers to a series of 578 news reports and editorials. Our study aims to inquire whether the figure of the People keeps its resourcefulness in an online conversational discourse regime. Particularly, we are interested in the way common people devise themselves as the People by mobilizing a specific political mythology established by both lay (people’s sanctity/ unity/ homogeneity/ purity; national mission; genuine Latin origin; resurrection of legendary times/ figures) and religious tradition (Orthodox church as founder of Romanian nation, sacredness of political realm, divine qualities of the nation), and recently, by an utopian approach to empowering technological revolutions. The transfer of power between the theological concept of God and the secular concept of People is analyzed in a cultural and linguistic frame: 1. the Romanian Orthodox tradition and the modern developments of the Byzantine concept symphonia; 2. the semantic and syntactic specificities of the Romanian language within online media. As shown by the analysis, the static, passive and dynamic renditions of Popor [People] pertain to a narrative of political transcendence.

Key Words: online reader comments, People, Kin, mythical thought, ideological thought, Orthodox tradition, people’s sanctity, symphonia, critical discourse analysis, Colectiv.
1. Online comments and mythical thought

The fire that burst in the “Colectiv” Club (Bucharest, Romania) on the night of October 30, 2015, killing and injuring over 150 young people, produced a wave of strong emotions across the country. The tragedy sparked off huge mass protests, initiated and organized mainly through new media. Having occurred just a few days after the fire, neither the overturning of the government led by Prime-Minister Ponta nor the so-called “restart” of the Romanian politics could curb the appetite of online commenters for a wider debate on the flaws, destiny and future of the Romanian society and people.

Our idea of building a searchable corpus of reader comments posted to the news reports about the “Colectiv” fire was inspired by a recent survey on the Romanians’ habit to take their news and information mostly from online sources (Newman et al. 2017). The high degree of participation (Jenkins 2006), engagement (McMillen 2013, 6), leverage (Rheingold 2000, ix), variety, and even unpredictability, which are symptomatic to new media communication, make such online comments an excellent pool of inquiry with respect to how capital issues, beliefs and ideas are managed by common people in times of trouble. Through their fresh grasp, ordinary citizens may be involved in the reconstruction of meanings, not only by giving feedback to public policies, but also by introducing issues on the agenda (Purcell et al. 2010, 2) and even by creating news as such. Thus, the Internet should be conceived as a medium of civic and political action, which challenges the ideological thought and its “ground-dominated language” to the point of their “exhaustion” and mobilizes in exchange mythical thought and its “figure-dominated language” (Flood 2001, 108). Standing on a wider mythological paradigm (a pre-digital mythology of political control plugs into a newer one, concerning the new media’s power of changing reality), online discourse functions like any other “mythical practice” (Cassirer 2008, 64-65, 311): it nuances notions that have been “voided” of signification. “Figures”, “condensation/ referential symbols” (Edelman 1999, 6) or “emblems” (Zafić 2007, 15, 21) are networked into a narrative structure. Serialization and repetition of phrases/ words contributes to establishing an ideal reciprocity among the elements circulated by online commenters, making them—Cassirer calls it “the law of concrescence and coincidence” of related mythical elements (Cassirer 2008, 93-97)—one and the same thing.

Since, as early as the ‘60s, Daniel Bell decreed “the end of ideology” and the obsolescence of all subsequent terminology (Bell 2000), it is perhaps worth asking if turning to the philosophies of political myth (Bottici 2009) can provide us with a shortcut to the recent questions raised...
by the digital era and the post-humanist paradigm. Are the new
technologies of power and information the way to a better public sphere?
How the perennial issues of humankind (life, love, death, faith, identity)
and the brand new problems of digitalization such as quality of debate,
representativeness of commentators, access/divide, localization (Benti-
vegna 2002, Ferber et al. 2007) interconnect and get situational responses
from temporarily mobilized users? Does a hyper-connected society resort
to myths in order to appreciate, interpret, and simplify a reality perceived
as too complex?

2. Figuring the “People”: Romanian language and Orthodox
religion

It is in critical and miscellaneous contexts (such as the Colectiv case)
that mythical thought seems to be privileged, albeit not as a basis for an
argumentation essentially different from ideological Cartesian demon-
stration (McGuire 1987), but as a basis for enforcing a language that
“concretizes” ideas (Cassirer 2008, 96). A language that can tell stories and
stimulate, in turn, an immediate reflex of serialized speaking.

It has been suggested that Romance languages are extremely figural
when they convey the notion of Power. Apparently, the building of modals
(which is different from Germanic languages) with the auxiliary a putea-
pouvoir-poder-potere expresses, irrespective of the full verb’s meaning, a
virtual power hidden underneath (Metzeltin 2015). Indeed, the modals
corresponding to the English can in our corpus reveal a close connection
between the People’s powers and a transcendent Power:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POPORUL [THE PEOPLE]</th>
<th>poate / nu poate conduce [can / cannot lead]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>poate ieși în stradă</td>
<td>[can take to the streets]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>poate să facă</td>
<td>[can do]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>poate să stea</td>
<td>[can stay]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>poate schimba</td>
<td>[can change]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>poate mișca munții</td>
<td>[can move the mountains]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>se poate orienta</td>
<td>[can guide itself]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Within this linguistic frame, the online readers of Gândul seem to
relate the word popor to an archetypal concept of Power. An etymological
viewpoint also makes it plain that the Latin populus—a raw translation
of the Greek demos and the root of all Romance nouns denoting “people”—
contains the tension between populus and plebs (Hristov 2010, 57-58),
between those empowered with political rights and those who, through
their forms of assembly (mass, mob or kin), can connect to a form of
elementary Power. As a matter of fact, the power of the people has been
seen as a “folk paradigm of political belief” (Olson 2016, 6), an important
thought that “underpins the normative force of democracy and democratization, providing them with a kind of sanctity and taken-for-granted rectitude in our political imagination” (Olson 2016, 2). Thus, the political imagination encapsulates the idea of the people as the sovereign, endowed with particular constituent power.

Before 1989, political language was studied in Romania mainly diachronically and as specialized lexis (political terminology). Accordingly, only the terms linked with national defining (popor-people; patrie-homeland, român, românesc-Romanian, România-Romania) won the researchers’ attention and got monographic treatment (Zafiu 2007, 26-27). For instance, the word popor was related to both Slav. narod and Lat. populus (Cornea 1980, 208-243). Applying a pragma-rhetorical analysis on a corpus of Romanian texts, Rodica Zafiu notices that the uses of the word popor [people] in the written press of the late 1990s vary from “national emphasis”, “political cliche”, “ethnographic/ sociological label” to “parody”. Correspondingly, popor may be related to three ideological layers: a) the 1848 rhetoric of emancipation; b) late 19th century and early 20th century nationalisms, popular movements known as “poporanism” or “sămânătorism”; and c) communist bureaucratic language (Zafiu 2002; 2007, 138-140). Nevertheless, even though noticed by Zafiu, personification through corporeal metaphors (e.g. “the body of the Romanian people”) and assignment of passive roles for nominal phrases (“Romanians”, “the Romanian people” or “the population of Romania” are “objects suffering violent actions”) are not discussed as elements of political myth but merely as “ideologemes” (Jameson 2010, 61) or as features of “wooden language” (Zafiu 2007, 29-79).

Taking into consideration that, disputed between ideological and mythical thought, the notion of People (integrated to various ideologies) has been treated, in the fashion of Bourdieu’s social critique (Bourdieu 1990), as “an absent fullness”, “a void signifier”, “a revolutionary principle assuming an impossible universality” (Laclau 2005, 60-115), our study aims to inquire whether the figure of the People (integrated to a mythical complex) keeps its resourcefulness in an online conversational discourse regime. Particularly, we are interested in the way common people devise themselves as the People by mobilizing a complex of analogous political myths, established by both lay and religious tradition, and recently, by an utopian approach to empowering technological revolutions (Poster 1997, Rheingold 2000, Wright 2012). The people’s sanctity (Mao 2017), unity (Girardet 1997, 101-134), homogeneity and purity (Canovan 1999, Mudde 2004), the national mission, the genuine origin (Latinity), the resurrection of legendary times/ figures (Kolarz 2003, 135-148) are only a few examples in the vast literature devoted to the peoples of the world and to People in general. Eventually, they prove Cassirer’s remark: “the mythology of a people does not determine but is its fate” (Cassirer 2008, 21). As far as the aforementioned enumeration is concerned, variety is only a stylistic
effect. More than anywhere else, the “concrescence” and “coincidence” of all involved elements lead to a self-contained, self-fulfilling, prophetic truth, which is proper to all political myths (Bottici 2009, 366). However, it should be noticed that, in the Romanians’ case, the civil mythology of the People is articulated on a religious mythology specific to the Orthodox mindset: the Orthodox church as the founder of the (Romanian) nation, the political realm’s sacredness, the nation’ divine qualities (Leustean 2008, 2014).

Recently, it has been pointed out that, in the Orthodox nation-states, the ongoing coexistence of nation (and a people-centered mythology) and religion led to the “re-sacralisation” of the latter. Otherwise put, it seems that national Orthodox churches need the People and its adherent mythology to stay coherent in order to re-legitimize as representatives of the spiritual power and cope with the main challenges of the globalized world: secularization and religious pluralism (Roudometof 2014, 781-790).

Hence, beside the capacity of the Romanian language to “figure” ideas, the Romanians’ religious ground—chiefly the attested capacity of the Orthodox Church to “hybridize” with local forms according to the Byzantine concept of symphonia (Leustean 2008, 423)—complicates the analysis of our corpus of online comments. So, the generic term People, which has turned into one of the key-actors of modern (online) politics (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999, Hristov 2010, Urbinati 2014, Kriesi 2014, Bos and Brants 2014, Arroyas Langa and Diaz 2016 etc.), draws in not only a resonance of “sacredness” (Mao 2017), but also proposes itself as a transcendent horizon to the activity of all state institutions. If the state-church relationship works according to symphonia, then it may be presumed that, in the same fashion, the state (and its institutions) engages in a “symphonic” relationship with the People (which has replaced God and His earthly representative, the Church). In brief, as a figure specific to a hybridized mythic thought, the People is the transcendence of all state institutions.

3. Methodology

Our investigation draws on a corpus of comments made by readers to a series of 578 news reports and editorials about the fire in the Colectiv Club. We identified and inventoried all the comments posted by readers to the news materials on this subject published on the website of the Romanian daily Gândul during a period of 32 days (from October 30, 2015—the night when the incident took place—to November 30, 2015). The case was an extremely sensitive one, with deep political and societal consequences (Grădinaru, Patraș and Postolea 2016), so it generated a great number of both news reports and comments. On average, there were 18 materials about the fire per day, with a peak of 58 articles on October 31, the next day after the fire, and a low of no news about the incident on November 23. The readers’ interest in the Colectiv
events and the upheavals they produced skyrocketed during the first days after the fire, following a trajectory similar to that of the news on this topic. On average, people left about 515 messages/ day (see the Graphs below).

The comment text files in the corpus were submitted to a semi-automatic process of mark-up (commenter nicknames) and cleaning (buttons, commands, spam messages). After these steps, the archive used in this analysis counts 16,250 comments which amount to 1,138,892 tokens (out of which ~591,089 content words).

Our study was informed by the principles and theories of corpus and text linguistics (McEnery and Hardie 2012, Sinclair 2004, Stubbs 2002) as well as by some of the methods specific to CDA (Fairclough 2003; van Dijk 2009; Widdowson 2007; Wodak and Meyer 2002). From a discursive...
perspective, one of the features of online news comments is that they are a mix of both written and spoken language patterns, as they “not only function as a board for lengthy edited posts (...), but also more often as a space for spontaneous spur-of-the-moment reactions to content” (McMillen 2013, 30). Since “a comment is a short value judgment about a specific topic” (Pérez-Granados et al. 2012, 113), nominal phrases, qualifications and mental-state verbs referring to beliefs, opinions or the process of thinking are quite frequent (e.g. a crede [to believe] counts 1939 occurrences, out of which 1061 are in the first person singular, i.e. cred [I believe]).

The analyses carried out for this study with AntConc (Anthony 2014) focused on the noun popor [people] and its 1007 occurrences in the corpus. Sparsely associated with the defamatory meaning of masses, countrymen, and mob (Mao 2017, 65), the most frequent correlatives of popor in the corpus are România [Romania], țară [country], stat [state], popor [the people], neam [kin, kinship], and națione [nation].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lemma</th>
<th>Absolute frequency</th>
<th>Normalized frequency / 10,000 content words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ROMÂNIA</td>
<td>2315</td>
<td>39.165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TARĂ</td>
<td>2088</td>
<td>35.325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STAT</td>
<td>1435</td>
<td>24.277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POPOR</td>
<td>1007</td>
<td>17.036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEAM</td>
<td>451</td>
<td>07.629</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAȚIUNE</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>02.892</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Absolute and normalized frequencies of popor and its related notions

Together these six types count 7,467 occurrences, or 1.26% of all the content words in the corpus. Their derivatives are also highly frequent: român [Romanian], either as an adjective or as a noun, counts 2,283 mentions (normalized frequency/10,000 words = 38.623), românesc [adj., Romanian] – 430 (7.275), statal [statal] – 8, national [national] – 497 (8.408). If we add these items to the mix, the total number of occurrences of these items rises to 10,677 and a proportion of 1.8% of all the content words in the corpus.
4. People and Kin

The commentators of Michelet’s seminal work *Le Peuple* emphasized that the Western concept *Peuple/People* is rather difficult to translate into the political terminology of Central and Eastern European cultures because they cannot entirely capture its juridical and civic significance (Neumann 2015, 126-127). Apparently, due to ethno-cultural differences, mechanic translation of concepts and religious ground (Orthodoxy), the Romanian language did not embrace the notions of *People* and *Nation* with their original theoretical meanings. While scholars have already emphasized that the religious ground (Orthodoxy in the Romanians’ case) has been a major factor shaping the local polity (Leuștean 2008, 2014), the modern term *People* should be discussed not only as the subject of various lay and religious myths—R. Boer notices that all of them “abuse” the biblical tradition (Boer 2009)—but also as a subject of debate between ideological and mythical thought, between “Romanian wooden language” (Zafiu 2007, 32-79) and a hybrid version (oral-written) of the Romanian language that is specific to new media communication.

Neumann (2015) is of the opinion that the term *popor* belongs to the triad *kin-people-nation*. Leaving *people* aside, Metzeltin (2002) believes that a more pertinent relationship establishes among *state-nation-language*. As already proven, in the political language of Romanian texts published before 1989 (mainly written press and political discourses), the word *neam* [kin], which sounds reactionary and archaic, seems to be favored in order to express a stronger cohesion of the People. But are the theorized contrasts archaic-modern, religious-civil, reactionary-progressive still valid in the new technological frame of discourse?

The tables below show some of the most frequent left and right collocates of the words *popor* and *neam* in the corpus.

### Table 2: Left (n-L) and right (n-R) collocates of *popor*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3-L</th>
<th>2-L</th>
<th>1-L</th>
<th>1-R</th>
<th>2-R</th>
<th>3-R</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ucide</td>
<td>împotriva</td>
<td>unui</td>
<td>român</td>
<td>timpul</td>
<td>războiului</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>facon</td>
<td>sute</td>
<td>de</td>
<td>de</td>
<td>vrem</td>
<td>referendumul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unitatea</td>
<td>Românesc</td>
<td>acesă</td>
<td>oaste</td>
<td>morbidă</td>
<td>ortodox</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>România</td>
<td>daște</td>
<td>noi</td>
<td>nu</td>
<td>dobrăgă</td>
<td>Stanley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>voie</td>
<td>reacție</td>
<td>din</td>
<td>nostru</td>
<td>biserică</td>
<td>indiciocire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fioc</td>
<td>pate</td>
<td>pentru</td>
<td>vrea</td>
<td>votat</td>
<td>votat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>doare</td>
<td>ca</td>
<td>voie</td>
<td>majoritar</td>
<td>stat</td>
<td>face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>slăvi</td>
<td>alăt</td>
<td>bani</td>
<td>firea</td>
<td>tot</td>
<td>antisipatie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rândul</td>
<td>jâră/a</td>
<td>tot</td>
<td>lațar</td>
<td>vina/a</td>
<td>mandat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ortodoxă</td>
<td>respectă/a</td>
<td>avocațul</td>
<td>manelist</td>
<td>jâră/a</td>
<td>crepști</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alegări</td>
<td>etnică</td>
<td>vândă</td>
<td>fotargie</td>
<td>săturat</td>
<td>doare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>voieții</td>
<td>căștălu</td>
<td>împotriva</td>
<td>creștin</td>
<td>Moscova</td>
<td>avere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jâră/a</td>
<td>vândă</td>
<td>respectă/a</td>
<td>armărit</td>
<td>alegări</td>
<td>ANAl-ul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rîmna</td>
<td>sudoodle</td>
<td>respectă/a</td>
<td>religia</td>
<td>trebuie</td>
<td>partidelor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>președintei</td>
<td>stat/a</td>
<td>respectă/i</td>
<td>ștărmașii</td>
<td>libertă/a</td>
<td>parlament</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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*Table 2: Left (n-L) and right (n-R) collocates of *popor*
As shown above, *Popor* is associated with both positively (*voiță* [will], *patos* [pathos], *dorița* [wish], *unitate* [unity], *sudoarea* [sweat]) and negatively connoted notions (*letargie* [lethargy], *ucidere* [killing], *selavi* [slaves], *răz bunăria* [vengeance]). Many collocates of *popor* convey mainly abstract meanings: *timp* [time], *religie* [religion], *stat* [state], *unitate* [unity], *viață* [life]. *Neam* is surrounded by a plethora of religious terms: *mântuire* [salvation], *catedrală* [cathedral], *maica* [archaic form of mother used to name the Holy Mother or Orthodox nuns], *biserica* [church], *credința* [faith], *sectanții* [the sectarian], *ortodoxie* [Orthodoxy]. However, the word *religion* itself, more abstract in nature, is found closer to *popor* than to *neam*.

Also, in the vicinity of *popor* there are many words pertaining to modern political culture and state institutions: *președinte* [president], *mandate* [mandate], *parlament* [parliament], *partide* [parties], *advocat* [advocate], *stat* [state], *alegeri* [elections], *referendum*, *ANAF* [acronym for the Romanian fiscal authority]. In the neighborhood of *neam* there is just one reference to an institutionalized structure, i.e. the KGB, an intelligence body usually perceived as threatening by Romanians. Perceivable differences between the two terms occur with respect to leader roles: *popor* is linked with the modern designation *președinte*, whereas *neam* is used near the archaic title *voievod* [voivod]. In line with their established connotations, exclusion markers based on group identity are more frequent in the case of *neam*: *trădători* [traitor(s)], *masonii* [the Masons], *străini* [foreigners/outsiders], *vânzători* [(country) sellers], *minoritari* [the minoritarian], *sectanții* [the sectarian].

*Popor* pairs with names of modern political institutions and inclusion values, whereas *neam* is attached to the values of an archaic society (exclusion, ethnocentrism etc.). If *popor* is associated with a rather domestic imaginary suggested by the word *casa* [house/home] in the set phrase *Casa Poporului* [The People’s House], *neam* [kin] is attached to a
religious imaginary suggested by catedrala [cathedral]. Zafiu notices that preferring Casa poporului to formal names such as Palatul Republicii or Palatul Parlamentului indicates an “involuntary expressivity” that has merged popular use with ironic distancing (Zafiu 2007, 182). Investigated by historians (Turcescu and Stan 2014, Neumann 2015, 138), the name of the main post-communist monumental project developed by the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchy, Catedrala Neamului [Our Kin’s Cathedral], has arrested attention due to its unexpected conceptual association.

The comments also include some subtle intertextual references to Romanian literature: popor triggers a mention to Ana Blandiana’s phrase popor vegetal [vegetal people], while neam șoimărește [the Șoimărești kin] references Mihail Sadoveanu’s title Neamul Șoimăreștilor.

All in all, in the collocations presented above, nouns, verbs and adjectives are clearly predominant, which, according to Zafiu (2007, 33-39), is a feature in line with the morpho-syntactic and pragma-stylistic characteristics of the “Romanian wooden language” (nominal style, qualifications, deontic modals). The 83 lexical collocates of popor include 1 pronoun (noi [we]), 1 negative adverb (nu [no]), 40 nouns, 23 verbs and 18 adjectives. The 85 different lexical collocates of neam comprise 1 pronoun (noi [we]), 2 times the adverb nu [no], 52 nouns, 15 verbs and 15 adjectives.

5. The People in static, passive and dynamic renditions

In the case of Romance languages any power – the People’s power included – can be decoded in the process whereby “abstract nouns turn into a predicative structure with a subject and a predicate, as well as through establishing possible synonyms, chronotopes, implications, antonyms and narrativizations” (Metzeltin 2015, 20). Starting from Metzeltin’s anthropological insights into the syntax of power— with its static, modal and dynamic aspects (2015, 19-23) and from Zafiu’s four-layered approach to “the Romanian wooden language” (2007, 39-79), we propose a model of analysis adapted to online communication among readers of daily news. In our corpus, static, passive and dynamic renditions of the noun popor [people] not only signal the concept’s former ideological uses, but also create a mythical frame of birth, growth, acknowledgement of powers, decay and fall.

5.1. What qualities for the Romanian People? (noun adjuncts and adjectives)

Our analysis focused on two frequent qualifying structures: one in which the word popor is the head of a prepositional phrase introduced by de [of], and one in which the noun is followed by an attributive adjective. In the former, the adjunct seems to qualify both the People as a whole (a
compact and homogeneous entity, according to the religious and lay mythological complex discussed above) and the people as a sum of ordinary individuals. In the latter, the qualities refer to the People as a whole. The first type of qualification (\textit{POPOR + DE + NOUN}) relies predominantly on figural language, while the second (\textit{POPOR + ADJECTIVE}) aggregates both ideological and figural language.

a) \textit{popor + de + noun}

In the corpus there are 30 cases in which \textit{popor} is determined by a prepositional phrase introduced by \textit{de} [of], out of which the most frequent combinations are:

- \textit{popor de împopoțonări, coloane oficiale, opulism} [of tawdriness, official convoys, opulence] (5 occurrences)
- \textit{popor de proști} [of stupid (men)] (4)
- \textit{popor de tâmși} [of simpletons] (3)
- \textit{popor de lași} [of cowards] (3)

Out of the 30 occurrences, only one may be valued as neutral albeit pleonastic (\textit{popor de oameni} [people of men]), all the other being associated with negative estimations related to:

- way of living (showing off – \textit{de împopoțonări}...),
- mental capacities (stupidity – \textit{de tâmși} [simpletons], \textit{de smintiți} [fools], \textit{de proști} [stupid (men)], \textit{de idioti} [idiots], \textit{de inapți} [rejectees]),
- moral values (cowardice – \textit{de lași} [cowards]),
- civic values (slavery, lack of independence, begging – \textit{milogi} [beggars], \textit{sclavi} [slaves], \textit{drogați} [addicts], \textit{osândiți} [damned (men)],
- ontological essence (viermi [worms], \textit{de 3 lei} [downscale]).

Comparatively, the occurrences of the structure \textit{NEAM + DE + NOUN} are fewer (13), but still negative. The layers of depreciation are almost the same as in the case of \textit{Popor} (stupidity, shallowness, lack of faith, slavery, lack of independence): \textit{neam de proști} [kin of idiots], \textit{cretini} [simpletons], \textit{acordeoniști} [accordion players], \textit{necredincioși} [non-believers], \textit{criminals} [criminals]), \textit{mancuriți} [Mankurt], \textit{slugă} [servants]. Both \textit{popor} and \textit{neam} are followed by \textit{de + noun} structures in about 3% of their occurrences.

b) \textit{popor + adjective}

\textit{Popor} tends to be qualified with an adjective much more often than, for instance, \textit{neam}. If \textit{neam} is used 89 times in phrases that include 11 different adjectives (19.73% of tokens), \textit{popor} is determined in 283 of its 1007 occurrences (28.1 %) by 48 different qualifying adjectives.
Table 4: Adjectives used with popor by type of connotation and order of frequency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NEUTRAL (10)</th>
<th>NEGATIVE (26)</th>
<th>POSITIVE (12)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>român [Romanian]</td>
<td>manelis [mane] [loving]</td>
<td>minunat [wonderful]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>majoritar [majoritarian]</td>
<td>klutar [fiddler]</td>
<td>mare [big/great]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>creștin [Christian]</td>
<td>amârât [wretched]</td>
<td>inteligent [intelligent]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>orthodox [Orthodox]</td>
<td>indobosit [brutified]</td>
<td>autentic [authentic]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intreg [entire]</td>
<td>vegetal [vegetal]</td>
<td>suveran [sovereign]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>politic [political]</td>
<td>umilir [humiliated]</td>
<td>unit [united]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>palestinian [Palestinian]</td>
<td>sacrificir [sacrificed]</td>
<td>sănătos [healthy]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maghiar [Hungarian]</td>
<td>revolit [revolted]</td>
<td>respectat [respected]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>german [German]</td>
<td>râzvrâțit [rebellious]</td>
<td>plătitor [(tax-)paying]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>englez [English]</td>
<td>ră [bad]</td>
<td>exceptional [exceptional]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>puturos [lazy]</td>
<td>deștept [smart]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>prosart [fooled]</td>
<td>bun [good]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PSD-ist [PSD (party)]</td>
<td>analfabet [illiterate]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown by Table 4, deprecating tendencies are obvious. Indicating traces of pre-'89 “wooden language” in today’s online communication, emphatic pronominal adjectives (e.g. acest popor [this people] — 32 tokens in our corpus; tot poporul / intreg poporul [all the people/ the entire people] — 26 tokens) and nationality qualifiers (e.g. poporul român [the Romanian people]—181 tokens) assign affective and incantatory overtones to the noun (Zafiu 2002, 2007, 139). Both popor and neam form semi-fixed phrases with ethnic qualifiers. Popor collocates more often with român (in 63.95% of its adjectival structures) and neam collocates with both românesc and român (in 74.15% of its adjectival structures). Thus neam tends to be more attached than popor to the notion of ethnic identity.

Depreciation, pathos and ritual repetition signal, at the discourse level, a stereotypy that is specific to mythical practices, thus to an emergent stage of myth. In this case, what is constantly being pointed at is the fact that the Romanians’ self-hatred, speculated from Cioran to Pîtu, Antohi and Oișteanu (Oișteanu 2006), is turning into a political myth.

5.2. What acts on the Romanian People (passive structures)

In the 1007 concordance lines of the word, we annotated 334 cases in which popor is acted on in semantically passive structures. Organized by semantic clusters, they refer to the following dimensions (see Table 5).

The image of a fundamentally flawed People, supplemented by the image of the People as a victim in dire need of rescuing and redemption, is running along with the intuition of its potential for change. Variety of negatively connoted words is, of course, a marker of expressivity and figurality. Also, the narrative frame is filled in with the particularized images of the People’s enemies: harmful actions directed against the People also specify the damaging agents.
Table 5: Passive structures with popor by semantic clusters

5.3. What the Romanian People does (dynamic structures)

The tension between the negative and positive views of the People is visible especially in structures in which the word popor is the agent of the verb. A list of the most common verbs associated with the word popor in the corpus includes the following entries (the numbers between brackets refer to the number of occurrences):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POPORUL [THE PEOPLE]</th>
<th>TYPES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>are/posedă [has/possesses] (46)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vrea [wants] (31)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ia decizii [makes decisions] (25)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alege [chooses/elects] (20)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>votează [votes] (18)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>se revolă/ reacționează/ se luptă [rebels/reacts/fights] (14)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vorbește [speaks] (9)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ia parte la apocalipsă [takes part in the Apocalypse] (9)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interpretează [interprets] (8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>se satură [gets fed up with] (7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iese/ se află în stradă [takes to/is in the streets] (7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As may be easily noticed, most frequently, the People is associated with decision-making. Accordingly, to act means, first and foremost, to decide. To these we may also add the structure POPORUL ARE [THE PEOPLE HAS] + NOUN, which can be interpreted as a way of expressing the ability/power to do something:

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This category also includes the deontic modal are nevoie [needs], which, in spite of its totalitarian flavour (Zafiu 2007, 37), has a twofold scope in the corpus: while drawing attention to lacks, inabilities or deficiencies, it also signals the ability of doing something.

If we refer back to evolutionist and deterministic frame of the 19th century, corpus analysis reveals an extended and very expressive personification of the People. Popor is thus seen as the subject of a process of organic development from birth to (self)extinction: se naște [is born], se constituie [forms], se dezvoltă [develops], evoluează [evolves], prosperă [prospers], se schimbă [changes], consumă [consumes], se dezintegrează [disintegrates], dispără [disappears], moare [dies], se autodistruge [self-destructs], merită să moară [deserves to die], își merită soarta [deserves its faith].

The commenters perceive the People as a living body invested with:

- **MENTAL/ COGNITIVE ABILITIES**: poporul [the People] – știe [knows], pricepe/ înțelege [understands], învăță [learns], citește [reads], crede [believes], consideră [considers], arată [shows], apreciază [appreciates], recomandă [recommends], accept [accepts], mystifică [mystifies], promite [promises];
- **EMOTIONS**: poporul [the People] – suferă [suffers], suportă [endures], se bucură [enjoys], iubește [loves], urăște [hates], se multumește [is happy with];
- **SENSES/ BODILY FUNCTIONS**: poporul [the People] – simte [feels], vede [sees], se uită [watches], mănâncă [eats], aude [hears], vomită [vomits], se trezește [awakens], se scoală [rises], doarme [sleeps];
- **MOBILITY**: poporul [the People] – vine [comes], pune mâna [grabs], pleacă [leaves], își face loc [makes its way].

Caught between structured and unstructured beliefs and repre-
sentations—that is, between ideology and myth—the People makes both structured and unstructured movements. The most frequent unstructured movements are: reacționează [reacts] (7), iese/ se află în stradă [takes to/is in the streets] (7), se satură [gets fed up with] (7), se revoltă [rebels] (6), face [does/makes] (3), se apără [defends itself] (2), se supără [gets angry] (1), dă jos [overturns] (1), cere [demands] (1), jefuieste [robs] (1). The most frequent structured movements are: ia decizii [makes decisions] (25), alege [chooses] (20), votează [votes] (18), dă mandat [mandates] (6), se întrunește [gathers] (3), propune [proposes] (3), inițiază [initiates] (1), legitimează [legitimates] (1), dă legi [makes laws] (1), încredințează puterea [gives power to] (1).

6. Conclusions

Drawing on a corpus of reader comments posted to the news reports about the Colectiv fire on the Gândul daily website, this article analyzes how “the void signifier” People (Laclau 2005) is disputed between ideological and mythical thought, between “wooden language” and figural language in a moment of political and societal crisis. Online readers perceive the (Romanian) popor as a victim of adverse forces and inner self-hatred. Replacing the absent God (Arato 2015, Mao 2017), the personified People is nevertheless endowed with various (civil) “powers”, all of them apparently originating in an archetypal, centralized Power.

Such transfer of power between the theological concept of God and the secular concept of People has been analyzed in a broader cultural and linguistic frame: 1. the Romanian Orthodox tradition, chiefly the modern developments of the Byzantine concept symphonia (Leustean 2008, 2014, Turcescu and Stan 2014); 2. the semantic and syntactic specificities of the Romanian language, whose inventiveness complicates the fine equations of Power (People-Nation-State) drawn so far (Zafiu 2007, Metzeltin 2015, Neuman 2015). If, on the symbolic level, the (Romanian) People can replace God and its Orthodox apparel, then discoursing on the people—especially within large communities of online readers—articulates a localized lexis (quasi-synonymous nouns such as neam-kin) with elements of lay and religious mythology.

The data gathered from the corpus show that the static, passive and dynamic renditions of Popor can be organized into a narrative of rising awareness. In a nutshell, the People proposes itself as an incarnated transcendence of institutions, as a representable transcendence of political space, in general.

This article proposed a recuperative (theoretical and empirical) analysis of the Romanians’ concept of People, one that is so deeply embedded in our cultural vocabulary. The corpus revealed a plethora of meaningful tensions (such as absent – present, abstract – concrete or dematerialized – anthropomorphic) that shape the People as a resourceful cognitive, affective, symbolic, and imaginary construct.
References:


