

ROXANA PATRAȘ ◦ CAMELIA GRĂDINARU

SORINA POSTOLEA

POWER TO THE PEOPLE:
MYTHICAL THOUGHT AND FIGURAL LANGUAGE IN ONLINE
COMMENTS ABOUT THE “COLECTIV” CASE

Roxana Patraș

“Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași, Department of Interdisciplinary Research
in Social Sciences and Humanities, Iași, Romania
E-mail: roxana.patras@yahoo.ro

Camelia Grădinaru

“Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași, Department of Interdisciplinary Research
in Social Sciences and Humanities, Iași, Romania
E-mail: camelia.gradinaru@uaic.ro

Sorina Postolea

“Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași, Department of English, Iași, Romania
E-mail: sorinapostolea@gmail.com

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” (Zafiu 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.

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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 (Bentivegna 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 demonstration (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:

POPORUL [THE PEOPLE]	<i>poate / nu poate conduce</i> [can / cannot lead]
	<i>poate ieşi în stradă</i> [can take to the streets]
	<i>poate să facă</i> [can do]
	<i>poate să stea</i> [can stay]
	<i>poate schimba</i> [can change]
	<i>poate mişca munţii</i> [can move the mountains]
	<i>se poate orienta</i> [can guide itself]

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 cliché”, “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 “sămănătorism”; 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 “conrescence” 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’s 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).

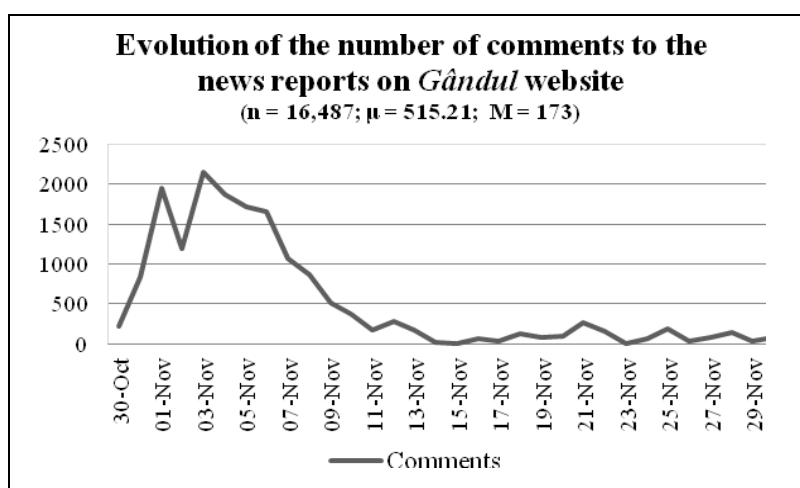
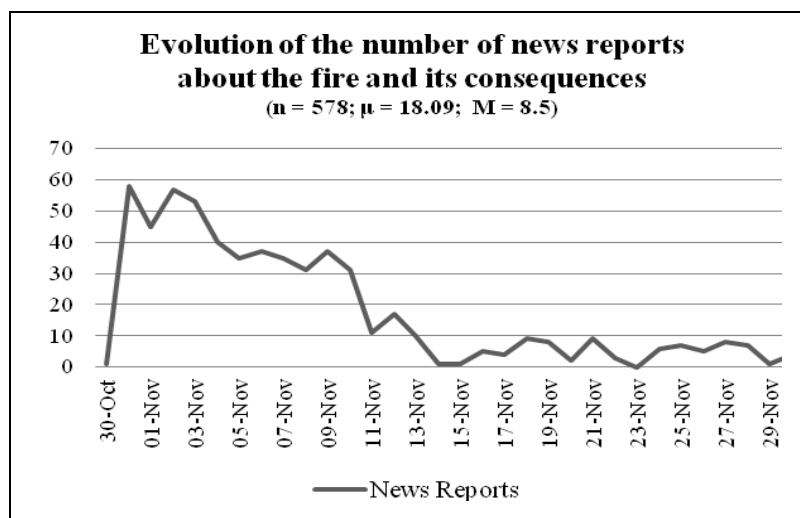
Hence, beside the capacity of the Romanian language to “figure” ideas, the Romanians’ religious ground—chiefly the attested capacity of the Orthodox Church to “hybridize” with local forms according to the Byzantine concept of *symphonia* (Leustean 2008, 423)—complicates the analysis of our corpus of online comments. So, the generic term People, which has turned into one of the key-actors of modern (online) politics (Blumler and Kavangh 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, Patraş 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 patters, 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 *națiune* [nation].

Lemma	Absolute frequency	Normalized frequency / 10,000 content words
ROMÂNIA [Romania]	2315	39.165
ȚARĂ [country]	2088	35.325
STAT [state]	1435	24.277
POPOR [the People]	1007	17.036
NEAM [kin, kinship]	451	07.629
NAȚIUNE [nation]	171	02.892

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, *național* [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 (Leuştean 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.

3-L	2-L	1-L		1-R	2-R	3-R
ucidere	împotriva	un/unui	POPOR [people]	român	timpul	răzbunării
facem	suntem	de		de	vrem	referendum/ul
unitatea	României	acest/ui		e/este	morbidă	ortodox
România	desființa	noi		nu	dorință/a	statul
voie	reacție	din	poporul poporului popoare popoarelor popoarelor bobor boborul boborului	nostru	biserică/a	îndobitocire
fost	patos	pentru		vrea	votat	votat
doare	caz	voința		majoritar	stat	face
sclavi	ales	banii		ăsta	tot	anticipate
rândul	țară/a	tot	popoarele popoarelor bobor boborul boborului	lăutar	vină/a	mandat
ortodoxă	respectă/a	avocatul		manelist	țară/a	oropsit
alegeri	etnică	vândă		letargie	săturat	doare
vieții	căpătâi	împotriva		creștin	Moscova	averea
țară/a	vândă	corupt/e	popoarele popoarelor bobor boborul boborului	amărât	alegeri	ANAF-ul
rămas	sudoarea	respectă/e		religia	trebuie	partidelor
președinte	stat/ul	reprezintă		sfărămași	liberă/a	parlament

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

3-L	2-L	1-L		1-R	2-R	3-R
pentru	catedrală/a/ei	mântuirii	NEAM [kin] neamul neamului neamuri neamurile neamurilor	românesc	țară/a	nu
străini	biserică/a/ii	jefuirii		de	euro	trași
răspuns/ul	străin/străini/i	catedrală/a/ei		prost	trădători	asta
protestând	împotriva	maică/a		milioane	facem	comentatorii
construirea	ortodoxă	tot		nostru	viitorul	biserica
biserica	țară/a	desființează		minoritarii	haideți	sectanții
maica	trădători/i/lor	desființării		vezi/vedem	estimată/e	fost
ortodoxiei	spiritual/ă	biserică/a		noi	masonii	euro
asupra	reprezintă	acest/ui		nu	spital/ul	viteaz
transformarea	popor/ului	credinței		român	primit	surse
neamului	voievozi	tragedia		fondurile	atenție	spitale
doneze	vânzător	spitalul		vrem	apărat	RON
costul	toți	păcăli		ăsta/asta	trebui	KGB
valorile	răniți	războaielor		nici	românesc	vrem
țară/a	principiu	răutății		meu	proști	uriasă

Table 3: Left (n-L) and right (n-R) collocates of *neam*

As shown above, *Popor* is associated with both positively (*voința* [will], *patoș* [pathos], *dorința* [wish], *unitate* [unity], *sudoarea* [sweat]) and negatively connoted notions (*letargie* [lethargy], *ucidere* [killing], *sclavi* [slaves], *răzbunării* [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], *sectanți* [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], *mandat* [mandate], *parlament* [parliament], *partide* [parties], *avocat* [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*: *trădător(i)* [traitor(s)], *masonii* [the Masons], *străin/i* [foreigners/outsiders], *vânzători* [(country) sellers], *minoritarii* [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* *șoimăresc* [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 (*POPOR + DE + NOUN*) relies predominantly on figural language, while the second (*POPOR + ADJECTIVE*) aggregates both ideological and figural language.

a) *popor + de + noun*

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

- *popor de împopoţonări, coloane oficiale, opulism* [of tawdriness, official convoys, opulence] (5 occurrences)
- *popor de proşti* [of stupid (men)] (4)
- *popor de tâmpiţi* [of simpletons] (3)
- *popor de laşi* [of cowards] (3)

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

- way of living (showing off – *de împopoţonări...*),
- mental capacities (stupidity – *de tâmpiţi* [simpletons], *de smintiţi* [fools], *de proşti* [stupid (men)], *de idioţi* [idiots], *de inapţi* [rejectees]),
- moral values (cowardice – *de laşi* [cowards]),
- civic values (slavery, lack of independence, begging – *mişcări* [beggars], *sclavi* [slaves], *drogaţi* [addicts], *osândiţi* [damned (men)]),
- ontological essence (*viermi* [worms], *de 3 lei* [downscale]).

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

b) *popor + adjective*

Popor tends to be qualified with an adjective much more often than, for instance, *neam*. If *neam* is used 89 times in phrases that include 11 different adjectives (19.73% of tokens), *popor* is determined in 283 of its 1007 occurrences (28.1 %) by 48 different qualifying adjectives.

NEUTRAL (10)	NEGATIVE (26)		POSITIVE (12)
<i>român</i> [Romanian]	<i>manelist</i> [manele-loving]	<i>nărod</i> [dumb]	<i>minunat</i> [wonderful]
<i>majoritar</i> [majoritarian]	<i>lăutar</i> [fiddler]	<i>mic</i> [small]	<i>mare</i> [big/great]
<i>creştin</i> [Christian]	<i>amărât</i> [wretched]	<i>manipulat</i> [manipulated]	<i>inteligent</i> [intelligent]
<i>orthodox</i> [Orthodox]	<i>îndobitocit</i> [brutified]	<i>jefuit</i> [robbed]	<i>autentic</i> [authentic]
<i>întreg</i> [entire]	<i>vegetal</i> [vegetal]	<i>înfometat</i> [hungry]	<i>suveran</i> [sovereign]
<i>politic</i> [political]	<i>umilit</i> [humiliated]	<i>indiferent</i> [indifferent]	<i>unit</i> [united]
<i>palestinian</i> [Palestinian]	<i>sacrificat</i> [sacrificed]	<i>incult</i> [uncultured]	<i>sănătos</i> [healthy]
<i>maghiar</i> [Hungarian]	<i>revoltat</i> [revolted]	<i>înapoiat</i> [backward]	<i>respectat</i> [respected]
<i>german</i> [German]	<i>răzvrătit</i> [rebellious]	<i>corupt</i> [corrupt]	<i>plătitor</i> [(tax-)paying]
<i>englez</i> [English]	<i>rău</i> [bad]	<i>cocalar</i> [petty gypsy]	<i>exceptional</i> [exceptional]
	<i>puturos</i> [lazy]	<i>ciudat</i> [bizarre]	<i>deştept</i> [smart]
	<i>prostit</i> [fooled]	<i>bolnav</i> [sick]	<i>bun</i> [good]
	<i>PSD-ist</i> [PSD (party)]	<i>analfabet</i> [illiterate]	

Table 4: Adjectives used with *popor* by type of connotation and order of frequency

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* / *întreg 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 Piţu, Antohi and Oişteanu (Oişteanu 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.

DIMENSION	TYPES
THE PEOPLE IS UNDER ATTACK (88 CASES)	→ <i>atacat</i> / <i>se fac lucruri împotriva lui</i> [attacked / things are done against it]; <i>duşmănit</i> [envied]; <i>urât</i> [hated]; <i>trădat</i> [betrayed]; <i>traumatizat</i> [traumatized]; <i>vândut</i> [sold]
THE PEOPLE IS HUMILIATED (46 CASES)	→ <i>umilit</i> [humiliated]; <i>ignorat</i> [ignored]; <i>nerespectat</i> [not respected]; <i>amărât şi oropsit</i> [wretched and damned]; <i>subjugat</i> [subjugated]; <i>jignit</i> [offended]; <i>transformat în sclavi</i> [transformed into slaves]; <i>înrobit</i> [chained]; <i>împilat</i> [oppressed]; <i>batjocorit</i> [made a laughing stock]
THE PEOPLE IS FOOLED/STULTIFIED (45 CASES)	→ <i>prostit</i> [stultified]; <i>manipulat</i> [manipulated]; <i>minjit</i> [lied to]; <i>păcălit</i> [duped]; <i>înşelat</i> [fooled]; <i>înapoiat</i> [kept backward]; <i>îndoctrinat</i> [indoctrinated]; <i>ţinut în întuneric</i> [kept in the dark]; <i>ţinut în lesă</i> [kept on a leash]; <i>îndobitocit</i> [stultified]
THE PEOPLE IS ROBBED (31 CASES)	→ <i>furat</i> [robbed]; <i>spoliat</i> [despoiled]; <i>jefuit</i> [plundered]; <i>jecmănit</i> [looted]; <i>stors</i> [soaked up]; <i>supt</i> [sucked on]
THE PEOPLE IS DESTROYED (31 CASES)	→ <i>distrus</i> [destroyed]; <i>dezbinat</i> [divided]; <i>lepădat</i> [lef behind]; <i>dus la pierzare</i> [led to perdition]; <i>împuşcat</i> [shot]; <i>sacrificat</i> [sacrificed]; <i>învărajbit</i> [discontented]; <i>rănit</i> [hurt]; <i>ars</i> [burned]; <i>omorât</i> [killed]; <i>muşcat</i> [bitten]; <i>împărţit</i> [divided]

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):

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

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:

	<i>drepturi</i> [rights]
	<i>putere</i> [power]
	<i>părerii</i> [opinions]
	<i>resurse</i> [resources]
POPORUL ARE	<i>şanse</i> [chances]
[THE PEOPLE HAS]	<i>autoritate</i> [authority]
	<i>acces</i> [access]
	<i>abilităţi</i> [abilities]
	<i>propuneri</i> [propositions]
	<i>interes</i> [an interest in]

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 naşte* [is born], *se constituie* [forms], *se dezvoltă* [develops], *evoluează* [evolves], *prosperă* [prosper], *se schimbă* [changes], *consumă* [consumes], *se dezintegrează* [disintegrates], *dispare* [disappears], *moare* [dies], *se autodistruge* [self-destructs], *merită să moară* [deserves to die], *îşi merită soarta* [deserves its faith].

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

- MENTAL/ COGNITIVE ABILITIES: *poporul* [the People] – *ştie* [knows], *pricepe/ înţelege* [understands], *învaţă* [learns] *citeşte* [reads], *crede* [believes], *consideră* [considers], *arată* [shows], *apreciază* [appreciates], *recomandă* [recommends], *accept* [accepts], *mistifică* [mystifies], *promite* [promises];
- EMOTIONS: *poporul* [the People] – *suferă* [suffers], *suportă* [endures], *se bucură* [enjoys], *iubeşte* [loves], *urăşte* [hates], *se multumeşte* [is happy with];
- SENSES/ BODILY FUNCTIONS: *poporul* [the People] – *simte* [feels], *vede* [sees], *se uită* [watches], *mănâncă* [eats], *aude* [hears], *vomită* [vomits], *se trezeşte* [awakens], *se scoală* [rises], *doarme* [sleeps];
- MOBILITY: *poporul* [the People] – *vine* [comes], *pune mâna* [grabs], *pleacă* [leaves], *îşi 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: *reacţionează* [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), *jefuieşte* [robs] (1). The most frequent structured movements are: *ia decizii* [makes decisions] (25), *alege* [chooses] (20), *votează* [votes] (18), *dă mandat* [mandates] (6), *se întruneşte* [gathers] (3), *propune* [proposes] (3), *iniţiază* [initiates] (1), *legitimează* [legitimizes] (1), *dă legi* [makes laws] (1), *încredinţează 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.

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