

# Exile, Scholarship, and Memory: Pushkin in Moldova between Cultural History and Politics

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## *Abstract*

This article analyzes more than two centuries of academic, public, and political afterlives of a brief but significant episode in Moldovan history. These are the three years in the early nineteenth century associated with Alexander Pushkin's stay in the region. Exiled from the imperial capital of St. Petersburg to a territory annexed by the Russian Empire only eight years prior, the young poet produced an important body of work during this period. As political regimes in the region changed, the study of Pushkin and interpretations of his exile have gained various political meanings, ranging from oblivion to admiration or sharp condemnation. The article traces the local intellectual tradition of studying Pushkin and his public image as subjects of political instrumentalization. It argues that although each of these spheres has made an independent contribution to the development of the topic, only looking at their overlap allows one to grasp the full complexity of the "Pushkin phenomenon" in Moldova.

**Keywords:** Alexander Pushkin; literature and politics; cultural diplomacy; Moldova; Chişinău.

## **Introduction**

In early June 2022, not even three and a half months after the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine—a war that by now had taken thousands of lives, displaced millions of people, and devastated entire communities—in Chişinău a group of politicians and culture professionals publicly celebrated Alexander Pushkin, Russia's national poet. In the park downtown named after Ştefan cel Mare,<sup>1</sup> this event was organized by the Representative Office of Rossotrudnichestvo in Moldova and the Russian community of Moldova.<sup>2</sup> In

<sup>1</sup> This park was named after Pushkin in 1949-1990, while its present name honors Stephen the Great, one of the most important rulers of late medieval Eastern Europe and a historical figure of core importance for Moldova after it gained independence, the country's national symbol (see Jonathan Eagles, "Ştefan cel Mare and Nationalism: The Prince as an Ethnosymbol," *The Annals of Putna* 9, no. 1 (2013): 137-149). Interestingly, in their announcement of the June 2022 Pushkin celebration shared on social media, representatives of Rossotrudnichestvo referred to the location simply as "the central park", omitting its official name.

<sup>2</sup> Rossotrudnichestvo is a Russian government agency that focuses on cultural diplomacy and educational affairs with post-Soviet states as its geopolitical and strategic target (the agency of-

front of Pushkin's monument, there gathered officials and the public to lay flowers and give speeches. The latter included representatives of the Russian Embassy in Moldova (with the ambassador himself), some oppositional Moldovan politicians, Rossotrudnichestvo employees, staff from the poet's house-museum in Chişinău, and others. They marked the 223rd anniversary of the poet's birth, the 202nd anniversary of his arrival in the city, and the international day of Russian language, established by the UN in 2011. The overall motto of this commemorative rally emphasized that for Moldova, Pushkin stood "a symbol of inseparable ties with Russia".

Celebrating the Russian national poet was not unusual for the Moldovan capital. For decades, depending on the significance of the anniversary, the city commemorated Pushkin's birth (in Moscow, 1799), his arrival in Bessarabia (1820, where he stayed for about three years), and his death (in a duel near St. Petersburg, 1837). Yet the 2022 celebration deserves attention not because of any major anniversary, but because of the overall political context. Honoring the Russian national poet outside Russia during a full-scale war launched by that country against Ukraine, a neighboring state to Moldova, provoked mixed reactions. At the time, Moldova focused on providing humanitarian assistance to Ukrainian refugees—primarily elderly people, women, and children fleeing ground attacks and air strikes that destroyed both military and civilian infrastructure. Against this backdrop, celebrating Pushkin in Chişinău without any reference to the ongoing war, especially given that the Russian leadership invoked the "protection" of Russian language and culture as part of its justification for the invasion, seemed at least tone deaf.<sup>3</sup>

The continued adherence to the traditional canon of honoring Pushkin in Chişinău also stood out against a broader global debate about the importance to rethink Russian culture and its imperial political dimensions. This debate emerged internationally shortly after February 24, 2022, among public intellectuals, cultural workers, scholars, and some politicians. As the figure on top of the Russian literary pantheon, Pushkin occupies a central place in this cultural canon, and the reassessment of the latter would inevitably affect the poet's cult. Rejection of Russian culture in 2022 and afterwards took various yet fragmented forms across the globe. These included, for instance, public appeals to major theaters to stop staging productions based on Pushkin's works. The issue remains contested and somewhat unresolved to this day.

In Ukraine, this reassessment took far more radical forms. These included removing Pushkin's works from school curricula, erasing his name from toponyms,

ficially inaugurated its presence in Moldova in 2009); the Russian community of Moldova is an organization representing ethnic Russians in the country active in arranging cultural, educational, and social activities that promote Russian language and heritage (officially established in 1993-1994).

<sup>3</sup> One must mention here that after the full-scale invasion the Pushkin museum-house in Chişinău has been offering free visits and guided tours to refugees from Ukraine, joining other cultural facilities in the city.



closing museum exhibitions, and demolishing monuments to the poet, which drew most of public attention.<sup>4</sup> In Moldova, by contrast, museums dedicated to Pushkin continued to operate, monuments remained standing, and anniversary dates continued to be marked. This resilience of the Pushkin cult in Chişinău and overall in the country is all the more striking given the strong solidarity that Moldovan politicians and ordinary citizens expressed and acted upon towards the victims of Russian aggression across their border.

This, however, does not mean that the poet's cult has not been challenged in Moldovan history. Over more than two centuries since the poet's "southern exile," not only politicians but also scholars have questioned both the significance of Pushkin and the need to commemorate his presence in the country. Such critiques became particularly visible during periods when Russia's political influence in the region weakened. At the same time, the fact that over the last sixteen years institutions acting as conduits of Russian cultural diplomacy—or "soft power"—have funded many Pushkin-related cultural programs in Moldova, helps explain why commemoration continued after February 24, 2022. Yet the topic of "Pushkin and/in Moldova" cannot be reduced to the interests of a "metropolitan center" alone. Nor should the local intellectual and cultural tradition of studying Pushkin be underestimated. This tradition spans roughly two centuries, although the volume and quality of intellectual—and especially academic—output have varied significantly over time, depending on political circumstances and funding.

This article offers a critical overview of scholarship, public perception and political uses of Pushkin's stay in Bessarabia, especially in Chişinău. It traces how literary scholars, local historians and politicians have shaped images of the region and the city over two centuries, as well as how the dominant view of Pushkin as either "one's own" or "foreign" heritage has been a subject of change. The persistence of the Pushkin cult in Moldova, the author argues, cannot be explained solely by external policies, such as Soviet cultural politics or present-day Russian funding. Instead, one shall consider multiple reasons why authors and opinion-makers in Bessarabia under the Russian Empire, in the Romanian nation-state, in the Moldavian SSR, and in independent Moldova kept repeatedly returning to Pushkin.

### The Emergence of Nostalgia (1820–1918)

One can trace the close connection between public discourse on Pushkin's stay in Chişinău (Kishinev), academic reflection on the subject, and its political use back to the mid-nineteenth century. Published memoirs and journalistic accounts about the poet in exile preceded professional scholarly studies. Already

<sup>4</sup> On "Pushkinopad," see Victoire Feuillebois (translated by Philip Clarke), "The Pushkin Museum Is Falling Down: 'Pushkinopad' in the Context of the Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine," *Fabula / Les colloques, Le XIXe siècle: actuel ou intempêtif?*, accessed December 17, 2025, <https://www.fabula.org/colloques/document14887.php>.

in the early nineteenth century, Pushkin's own poetic texts introduced the newly annexed southern territories, especially Bessarabia (along with the Caucasus and the Crimea), creatively "reworked" through the poet's imagination, to the readers throughout the Russian empire. These writings—including literary works and letters to acquaintances in St. Petersburg, Moscow, and elsewhere—remain problematic from a postcolonial reading, as they orientalized and romanticized the region in ways similar to travel literature of the time, and justified the imperial conquest, referring to the latter bringing its civilizing mission to "frontier lands".<sup>5</sup>

In Pushkin's portrayal, an unsettled Bessarabian region was rich in folkloric "authenticity" that the poetic imagination was sensitive to. During his stay, the poet produced both completed works and numerous drafts, sketches, and letters. He wrote three long poems, dozens of lyrical pieces, worked on several prose texts, and began what is considered to be a core masterpiece in the body of his works, the novel in verse *Evgenii Onegin*, the central work of his career, widely considered to be a masterpiece.<sup>6</sup> Bessarabian everyday reality provided abundant material, which Pushkin interpreted as a poet from the "north" and a representative of the imperial intellectual elite observing—and partly absorbing—the "peculiarities of the south."

From the 1850s onward, texts published in the region about Pushkin's stay added further details to the image of the imperial poet. In the 1860s and 1870s, however, interest in Pushkin declined across the empire, and publications on his southern exile were relatively sparse.<sup>7</sup> Renewed attention came with the erection of monuments to Pushkin in Moscow in 1880 and in Chişinău five years later, as well as with the fiftieth anniversary of his death in 1887. The real outbreak took place in the run-up to the centenary of the poet's birth in 1899.<sup>8</sup> By then, Pushkin's fame and reputation had evolved from a poet admired mainly by the intelligentsia

<sup>5</sup> Several prominent authors have devoted their work to a postcolonial interpretation of Pushkin's texts, as well as of his contemporaries. See Susan Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 36–53; Harsha Ram, "Pushkin and the Caucasus," in *The Pushkin Handbook*, ed. David M. Bethea (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 379–402.

<sup>6</sup> See literary criticism of these works in Michael Wachtel, "Pushkin's Long Poems and the Epic Impulse," in *The Cambridge Companion to Pushkin*, ed. Andrew Kahn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 75–89. For *Onegin*, see A.D.P. Briggs, *Alexander Pushkin: A Critical Study* (London: Croom Helm; Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble, 1983), 187–212; Marcus Levitt, "Evgenii Onegin," in *The Cambridge Companion to Pushkin*, ed. Andrew Kahn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 41–56.

<sup>7</sup> For statistics on publications about Pushkin in the 19th-century press, see Paul Debreczeny, *Social Functions of Literature: Alexander Pushkin and Russian Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 162–193.

<sup>8</sup> A relatively complete list of publications about the poet that appeared in Bessarabia and Odessa during these decades is presented in Ina Strelina, ed., *A. S. Puşkin și Basarabia: bibliografie* (Chişinău: Museum, 1999), 34–39.



(the leitmotif of the 1880 celebration)<sup>9</sup>—partly for his fraught relationship with the tsarist court—into a figure embraced by the empire as a whole.<sup>10</sup> The massive cultivation of his image found its reflection in the proliferation of memoirs about the poet’s southern exile published both in the region and in the imperial capitals. Once the jubilee was over, public attention declined, which is characteristic of later periods as well.

Until the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, publications in Russian newspapers and “thick journals” largely echoed Pushkin’s own perception of his place of exile, presenting Chişinău as a provincial town surrounded by “untouched” nature. Stories about the poet’s adventures helped anchor local topography in public imagination throughout the empire. By the 1830s, Chişinău was divided into an “upper” and a “lower” town. The former, shaped by Russian imperial planning, featured straight streets, administrative buildings, and a public garden. In numerous memoirs, the “lower” town was described as an antipode of the “upper” one, a chaotic “unruled” space inhabited by the city’s multiethnic population. From the 1850s, in public accounts, Pushkin functioned as a mediator between these two “worlds”: he socialized in Russian administrative and military circles as a special envoy to the governor, yet for quite some time lived in the “lower city.” After arriving in Chişinău, he stayed in the merchant Naumov’s guesthouse, then in the mansion of Inzov (governor of Bessarabia in 1821–1829 and a supervisor of Pushkin), and in other locations around the city. Pushkin’s unconventional choice of residences and especially his intentionally provocative behavior violated the norms of propriety (which he was supposed to avoid as a civilian under surveillance) but generated stories and gossip that continued to circulate long after his departure.<sup>11</sup>

For public authors from these decades, it was essential to map the poet’s movements through the city and its surroundings in order to assess how well these places were preserved. In the decades between Pushkin’s exile of the 1820s and the commemorative wave of the 1880s and 1890s, a number of buildings associated with him had been altered or (partially) destroyed. By the end of the nineteenth century, a canon “Pushkin topography” of Chişinău had taken shape, encompassing places of his residence, work, leisure, and adventure. These included the alleys of the city’s public garden—where a monument to the poet was erected in 1885—as well as sites outside the built-up city associated with his duels or romantic encounters.

<sup>9</sup> On this see Marcus C. Levitt, *Russian Literary Politics and the Pushkin Celebration of 1880* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

<sup>10</sup> On this see Marcus C. Levitt, “Pushkin in 1899,” in *Cultural Mythologies of Russian Modernism: From the Golden Age to the Silver Age*, edited by Boris Gasparov, Robert P. Hughes, and Irina Paperno, *California Slavic Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 183–203.

<sup>11</sup> For a thematic analysis of the plots of Pushkin’s biography during his “southern exile,” see my earlier article Anastasia Felcher, “Vospominaniya o Pushkine v Bessarabii: opyt tipologizatsii” [“Memories of Pushkin in Bessarabia: An Attempt at Typology”], *The Journal of Ethnology and Culturology*, 2010, 334–339.

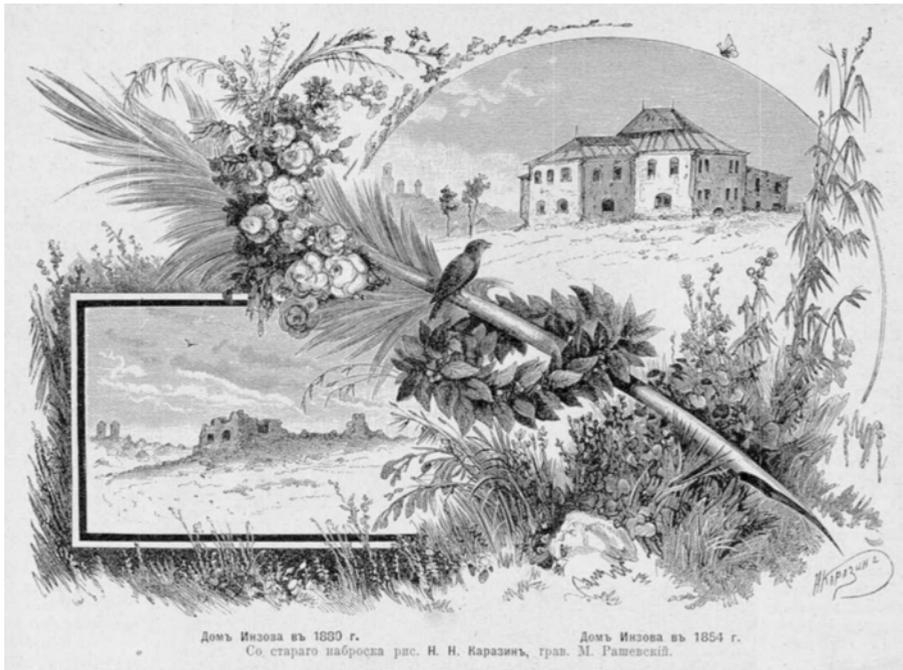


**Fig. 1a.** “Inzov Mountain near Chişinău, the site of the house where Pushkin lived” (Source: *Zhivopisnaia Rossiia [Picturesque Russia]*, 1898, vol. 5, part 2, 169).

It is noteworthy that, of all Pushkin’s apartments in Chişinău at the time, the most famous was the one located in the former mansion where Inzov lived. By the end of the nineteenth century, after several earthquakes, the building suffered significantly and was eventually demolished by order of the city authorities. Sketches of the mansion in its original state and in ruins (see Fig. 1a and Fig. 1b) shaped the visual repertoire of late-nineteenth-century publications about Pushkin in Chişinău. These images reinforced the sense of nostalgia, as well as regret over the careless treatment of Pushkin-related sites by municipal authorities. In 1898, the authors of a volume in the collection *Picturesque Russia* lamented the condition of the former mansion: “Now there is no trace of the garden left, and only a heap of filthy rubbish remains of the house, owing to the proximity of the barracks.”<sup>12</sup> It is striking how often Inzov’s mansion was discussed in comparison to either the monument to the poet in the city garden (1885) or Naumov’s inn, which later became the Pushkin museum-house in Chişinău (1946). At the end of the nineteenth century, the future museum building that, roughly half a century later, would draw crowds, was referred to dismissively as nothing more than a “simple mud hut.”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *Zhivopisnaia Rossiia: Otechestvo nashe v ego zemel’nom, istoricheskom, plemennom, ekonomicheskom i bytovom znachenii [Picturesque Russia: Our Fatherland in Its Land, Historical, Tribal, Economic, and Everyday Meaning]*, vol. 5, pt. 2: *Malorossiiia i Novorossiiia. Bessarabskaia, Khersonskaia, Ekaterinoslavskaia i Tavricheskaia gubernii [Little Russia and New Russia. Bessarabian, Kherson, Yekaterinoslav, and Taurida Provinces]*, ed. P.P. Semenov (St. Petersburg; Moscow: Tovarishchestvo M. O. Vol’f, 1898), 158.

<sup>13</sup> *Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin: iubileinyi al’bom v pamiat’ stoletii so dnia rozhdeniia poeta, 1799–1899 [Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin: Anniversary Album in Memory of the Centenary of the Poet’s birth, 1799–1899]* (St. Petersburg: Izdanie A. F. Marksa, 1899), 15.



**Fig. 1b.** “Inzov’s house in 1854 and in 1899, from an old sketch by N.N. Karazin and an engraving by N. Rashevsky” (Source: *Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin [Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin]*, 1899, 8).

The erection of a monument to the poet in the city garden in 1885 triggered a new wave of regional publications about Pushkin. A monument in Odesa/Odessa was erected only four years later, so publications on the subject often treated the two cities together. Speeches delivered at monument inaugurations became a distinct genre and were reprinted in the press for years. These occasions allowed public figures from the region to contribute to an empire-wide discourse on the genius poet. Representatives of both the intelligentsia and the authorities emphasized that the monuments had been erected on the initiative of “the people,” suggesting popular love for Pushkin on the imperial periphery. Anniversary speeches frequently highlighted the importance of the local environment, society, and even nature for the poet who by then stood at the center of the empire’s cultural pantheon. Notably, many speeches also dwelled on the “Russianness” of the region—a term understood less in ethnic than in geographical and political terms.

As the centenary of Pushkin’s birth in June 1899 approached, these narratives were revived and countless reproduced. This repetition helped consolidate an image of Bessarabia among the mass reading public as a distant land where exuberant nature and somewhat unrestrained morals prevailed over civilization. The memory of the Russian poet was thought to be honored there as an exceptional episode in an otherwise undistinguished regional history. A year before the

jubilee, a volume of *Picturesque Russia* published in St. Petersburg with a chapter on Bessarabia stated that “the surroundings of the city are very picturesque,”<sup>14</sup> but “no monuments of antiquity have been preserved in Chişinău and its environs,”<sup>15</sup> and that “Pushkin still lives in the memory of the people of Chişinău.”<sup>16</sup> A Pushkin jubilee volume published a year later in St. Petersburg summarized the poet’s Bessarabian years into a single sentence: “Pushkin led a free life in Chişinău, frequented Russian and local society, courted ladies, attended feasts and played cards, and had several affairs and duels.”<sup>17</sup>

Literary scholars, whose works on Pushkin’s life and poetics started appearing from the 1860s onward, interpreted this socially unconventional behavior as evidence of creative search and experimentation. Early biographers, however, varied in their assessments of the Bessarabian period. P. Annenkov, whose materials for Pushkin’s biography were published in 1855 and 1859, described the Chişinău years as “the story of the delusions of the most brilliant mind of the era,” lamenting that the poet in Bessarabia was “dissolute, sometimes even insane.”<sup>18</sup> By contrast, another major biographer, P. Bartenev, in works published in 1861 and 1866, acknowledged the difficulty of grasping “the main features of Pushkin’s scattered, restless, and varied life,”<sup>19</sup> but argued that the Chişinău period ultimately benefited the poet’s talent, since it provided him experience of a reality radically different from that of the capital.

The anniversary dates of 1887 and 1899 stimulated the publication of new biographical works by scholars “from the south,” like A. Shimanovskii, I. Halippa, and A. Iatsimirskii.<sup>20</sup> These authors devoted more attention to Pushkin’s everyday life and surroundings in Chişinău and synthesized previously published information about the topography of his exile. Scholars in Bessarabia and Odesa

<sup>14</sup> *Zhivopisnaia Rossiia*, 161.

<sup>15</sup> *Zhivopisnaia Rossiia*, 163.

<sup>16</sup> *Zhivopisnaia Rossiia*, 158.

<sup>17</sup> *Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin: iubileinyi al’bom*, 15.

<sup>18</sup> P.V. Annenkov, *Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin v Aleksandrovskaia epokhu, 1799–1826 gg.* [*Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin in the Alexandrine Era, 1799–1826*] (St. Petersburg: Tip. M. Stasiulevicha, 1874), 169.

<sup>19</sup> P.I. Bartenev, *Pushkin v iuzhnoi Rossii. Materialy dlia ego biografii* [*Pushkin in Southern Russia: Source Materials for His Biography*] (Moscow: Tip. V. Gracheva i komp., 1862), 1127.

<sup>20</sup> V.A. Iakovlev, comp. *Otzyvy o Pushkine s iuga Rossii: v vospominanie piatidesiatiletiia so dnia smerti poeta 29-go ianvaria 1887* [*Recollections of Pushkin from Southern Russia: Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Poet’s Death (29 January 1887)*] (Odessa: tip. P. Froantsova, 1887); A.N. Shimanovskii, *Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin: O prebyvanii ego v Kishineve v sviazi s predydushchei i posleduiushchei zhizn’iu* [*Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin: His Stay in Chişinău in the Context of His Earlier and Later Life*] (Kishinev: Tip. Kashevskogo, 1900); I. N. Halippa, “Gorod Kishinev vremen zhizni v nem Aleksandra Sergeevicha Pushkina” [“The City of Chişinău in the Years When Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin Lived There”], in *Trudy Bessarabskoi gubernskoi uchenoi arkhivnoi komissii*, vol. 1 (1900); A. I. Iatsimirskii, “Pushkin v Bessarabii” [“Pushkin in Bessarabia”], in *Pushkin*, ed. S. A. Vengerov, vol. II (St. Petersburg: tip. “Slovo,” 1908), 158–179.



shared the opinion—by then widely accepted—that despite the lawlessness of everyday existence, “our famous poet did not entirely devote himself to passions of the heart, revelry, or cards,”<sup>21</sup> but remained deeply engaged in serious inner and creative work. Anniversary collections intended for a mass readership echoed this expert view: “he read and wrote so much that it seemed to him as if he had discovered for the first time ‘quiet work and a thirst for reflection.’”<sup>22</sup>

### Competing Narratives (1918–1944)

As a result of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the Civil War of 1917–1922 in Russia, the Romanov Empire ceased to exist. The collapse of three more empires following the end of World War I in 1918 brought radical changes to the lives of European countries, especially in Central and Eastern Europe. The interwar period was shape-shifting for the formation of new nation-states on the continent. These changes directly affected life in the region where the Russian poet had once been exiled. Over the course of several years, political governance there underwent a series of radical transformations. Thus, in 1918, Bessarabia became a province of the Romanian nation-state, and in 1922 Odesa and the surrounding region came under the control of the newly formed Soviet Union. Two years later, in 1924, the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Republic (MASSR) was formed on part of the Ukrainian SSR (Pushkin visited this territory during his travels), to demonstrate to the new Romanian “subjects” the alleged advantages of living in the “country of the Soviets.”

The new reality and territorial changes in the region affected not only how the topic of “Pushkin and Chişinău” came to be interpreted in public, professional and political discourse. They also changed the geography of knowledge production on the subject. The civil war in Russia and emigration related to it put on the map new centers where intellectual work on Russian culture was written and published. The first was the newly formed USSR with its center in Moscow, while the second included the destinations of Russian white émigrés, especially France, Germany, Yugoslavia, and China. These two “centers” interpreted Russian culture from radically different ideological points of view, which one could follow via publications produced there. Pushkin, due to the approaching centenary of his death in 1937 and his core significance as not only literary but an ideological figure, ended up at the center of the “battles” between these two “centers.”

Bessarabia, having become a province of the Romanian kingdom, to an extent kept its multi-ethnicity and culture “inherited” from the previous regime. Along with other languages, Russian remained in use in the public sphere of the province, which caused certain tension about how to govern the territory as part of a unified Romanian nation-state. In this regard, throughout the twenty-five years,<sup>23</sup> the

<sup>21</sup> Shimanovskii, *Alexandr Sergeevich Pushkin*, 189.

<sup>22</sup> *Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin: iubileinyi al'bom*, 15.

<sup>23</sup> Counting the interwar period (1918–40) and the years of World War II (1941–44).

cultural policy of the Romanian kingdom toward the newly acquired province was centered around language and culture. Romanianization concerned not only the need to translate the province's administrative system into Romanian, but also to reshape the entire public sphere.<sup>24</sup> Press reports from various Romanian cities show that right after the unification, Bessarabia was a relatively unfamiliar territory. Many Romanian authors who have been to the province noted the Russian Empire's presence in the urban layout, architecture, culture, and everyday life of the area.<sup>25</sup>

It is noteworthy that Pushkin and his stay in Chişinău were mentioned relatively rarely in Romanian and Bessarabian newspaper pieces in the 1920s, usually as an ethnographic interest.<sup>26</sup> Closer to the centenary of the poet's death in 1937, public discourse in Bessarabia added articles that did not differ much in content from pre-revolutionary Russian ones. They focused on expressing regret over the loss of Inzov's mansion and were mostly amateur notes about walks through Pushkin places in Chişinău.<sup>27</sup> This does not mean, however, that the Russian poet's presence in the city's public space went unnoticed by those who reflected on the ideological "significance" of the streets and squares of the former imperial outskirts. In particular, in 1939, it was reported that a decision had been made to erect a monument to the Romanian national poet Mihai Eminescu in the center of the public garden, relatively close to Pushkin's bust.<sup>28</sup> Two years later, during World War II, after a brief seizure of the area by the Red Army and the subsequent return of the Romanian administration, a local newspaper reported on the decision to erect a monument to the Romanian poet not next to Pushkin's bust, but in its place.<sup>29</sup>

At the same time, as A. Skvortsova rightly noted, cultural and literary life in interwar Bessarabia in the Russian language continued to exist, though in a largely limited way.<sup>30</sup> It was reduced to public occasions celebrating significant figures of Russian culture, more often classical than Soviet (the latter could be persecuted by the authorities). The Russian-reading public in Bessarabia had limited access to foreign (émigré and, rarely, Soviet) printed production. Until the mid-1920s, Russian-language newspapers continued to be published relatively unhindered

<sup>24</sup> On Greater Romania's uneasy experience of integrating Bessarabia see Rebecca Haynes, *Moldova: A History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2020), 117–129.

<sup>25</sup> See a selection of articles on interwar Chişinău in the following collection: Diana Vrabie, ed., *Chişinău. Evocări interbelice* (Bucharest: Editura Eikon, 2018).

<sup>26</sup> Vrabie, *Chişinău. Evocări interbelice*, 32, 74, 114. It is noteworthy that the above-mentioned bibliography (Strelina, *A. S. Puşkin și Basarabia*) does not mention any publications on the subject until the 1930s.

<sup>27</sup> Vrabie, *Chişinău. Evocări interbelice*, 171, 178, 210, 221, 252–253, 256, 278.

<sup>28</sup> *Viața Basarabiei*, May 1939, no. 5, 351.

<sup>29</sup> *Basarabia* newspaper, November 6, 1941.

<sup>30</sup> Alla Skvortsova, *Russkie Bessarabii: opyt zhizni v diasporie, 1918–1940 gg.* [*The Russian Population of Bessarabia: Living in the Diaspora, 1918–1940*] (Chişinău: Pontos, 2002), 245–250.



in the region, being the main conduits of nostalgia.<sup>31</sup> On their pages, one could read about Pushkin and literary evenings organized in his honor. By the 1937 anniversary, there could have been more publications on the topic, but by that time, the Russian press in the province had largely disappeared. The Russian-language press of interwar Bessarabia continued writing about Pushkin places in the city, referring to the “natural” interest of “us, the people of Kishinev” in the poet’s life in the city.<sup>32</sup> Stories about the poet’s eccentric appearance and behavior during his promenade in the city garden were particularly popular.

On the occasion of the 1937 anniversary, the Bessarabian Women’s Society organized evenings in memory of the poet (under police supervision).<sup>33</sup> There, addresses such as “Pushkin in Chişinău” and “Pushkin—a world genius” were publicly read; festivities organized in a grassroots manner were held in the city; and several memorial services took place, but no official celebrations followed.<sup>34</sup> This commemoration of the poet by a small group of nostalgic citizens in Chişinău was not unique throughout the former cities of the Russian Empire. After World War I, a number of them became part of nation-states, while keeping a somewhat visible Russian-language cultural life. A close example is Vilnius, where the estate of the poet’s younger son and his wife/widow Varvara stood, and where she organized a “Pushkin corner” shortly before dying in 1935.

The Bessarabian academic discourse of the time about the poet and his stay in the region, produced in Romanian, is a much more complex and interesting phenomenon. The main source for reading through the interest of the Bessarabian intelligentsia in the subject is the leading literary and social journal of interwar Bessarabia, *Viaţa Basarabiei*. Under the editorship of P. Halippa and N. Costenco, the journal published pieces by local intellectuals, the majority of whom were committed to the idea of Romanian identity in the region. While emphasizing the need for cultural rapprochement with Bucharest, the editors simultaneously sought to affirm the region’s uniqueness and its historical experience within the broader Romanian cultural fabric and heritage. The journal started publication relatively late, in 1932, fourteen years after Bessarabia became part of Romania. An image of Pushkin’s bust in the winter twilight of the city garden framed the cover of the journal’s first issue (Fig. 2a). The poet’s bust joined the gallery of romantic images of the province accompanying the journal’s monthly issues.

Throughout its short existence (the journal was published for twelve years only, until 1944), *Viaţa Basarabiei* generally ignored the topic of Pushkin in Chişinău. The exception was the period leading up to the 1937 anniversary. On this occasion, the journal published literary articles on the subject, translations of Pushkin’s poems into Romanian, and dedicated an entire issue to the jubilee,

<sup>31</sup> Skvortsova, *Russkie Bessarabii*, 250–251.

<sup>32</sup> V. Monchinsky, “Pushkin-Kishinevets,” *Bessarabskaia Pochta*, No. 4503 (June 23, 1935): 11.

<sup>33</sup> Skvortsova, *Russkie Bessarabii*, 265.

<sup>34</sup> *Bessarabskaia Pochta*, No. 5139 (1937): 1.

including a bibliography on the subject (Fig. 2b).<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, the authors were aware of the scale of the cult being constructed in the USSR at the time.<sup>36</sup> In addition to literary reflections and retellings of details from the poet's life in the region, the authors of the anniversary issue saw their task as determining the significance of Bessarabia in Pushkin's life. On the one hand, they insisted on the universal significance of the poet's work. On the other hand, they emphasized the Russian poet's influence on Romanian cultural heritage, which, they argued, had its roots in impressions of the Bessarabian environment.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, among the numerous authors published in *Viața Basarabiei*, there was no consensus on how Pushkin felt about the region and its non-Russian locals. For example, an article from 1933 asserted Pushkin's love for Bessarabia,<sup>38</sup> while a later publication, from 1939, claimed that the young poet's scandalous behavior during his life in Chișinău testified to his lack of respect for local society and customs.<sup>39</sup> Overall, the variety of articles devoted to the 1937 anniversary of Pushkin's death in *Viața Basarabiei* can be summarized as arguing that the years spent in Bessarabia (the region was called Moldova) were significant for the formation of the poet's personality, and that he himself did not resent his life as an exile but, on the contrary, enjoyed it.<sup>40</sup>

In Chișinău, E. Negovskii's amateur *Calendar of Pushkin's Days* was also published for the anniversary—an attempt to record the poet's stay in the region day by day.<sup>41</sup> The “calendar” reconstructed the events of the poet's everyday life alongside his creative achievements. Because of its limited print run, the *Calendar* soon became a bibliographic rarity. Special editions on the subject in Romanian were also published in Bucharest at the time. For example, in 1937, E. Dvoichenko's book *Pușkin și România* appeared, in which she addressed the question of creative relationships and influences between the Russian poet and

<sup>35</sup> See the list of articles devoted to Pushkin published in *Viața Basarabiei* in the bibliographic collection by Strelina, A. S. *Pușkin și Basarabia: bibliografie*, 28–29, as well as by Skvortsova, *Russians of Bessarabia*, 258–259.

<sup>36</sup> I. Negrescu, “A. S. Pușchin și Basarabia,” *Viața Basarabiei*, nos. 1–2 (Chișinău, 1937): 17.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> E. Gane, “Motive moldovenești în creația poetică a lui A. S. Pușchin,” *Viața Basarabiei*, № 7 (1933): 9–17.

<sup>39</sup> A. Boldur, “Istoria Basarabiei sub dominațiunea rusească,” *Viața Basarabiei*, no. 5 (1939): 33–48.

<sup>40</sup> E. Negovschi, “Elementul românesc în opera lui Pușchin,” *Viața Basarabiei*, No. 1–2 (1937); E. Dvoicenco, *Pușkin și România (viața și opera lui Pușkin în Basarabia și influența sa asupra scriitorilor români)* (București, Imprimeria Națională, 1937), 15.

<sup>41</sup> Evstafii Negovskii, *Kalendar' dnei Pushkina [Calendar of Pushkin's Days]*. Anniversary edition, in six issues (Kishinev: M. E. Blanka Press, 1937). The genre of the “biographical calendar” has proven to be quite stable in Pushkin studies. The most famous example is the four-volume reference work edited by Mstislav Tsiavlovski, the first two volumes of which were published in the 1950s: M. A. Tsiavlovski, *Letopis' zhizni i tvorchestva Pushkina [The Chronicle of Pushkin's Life and Creative Work]*, t. 1 (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1951). The period of the “southern exile” is treated in particular detail in this genre in the works of V. Kushnirenko.

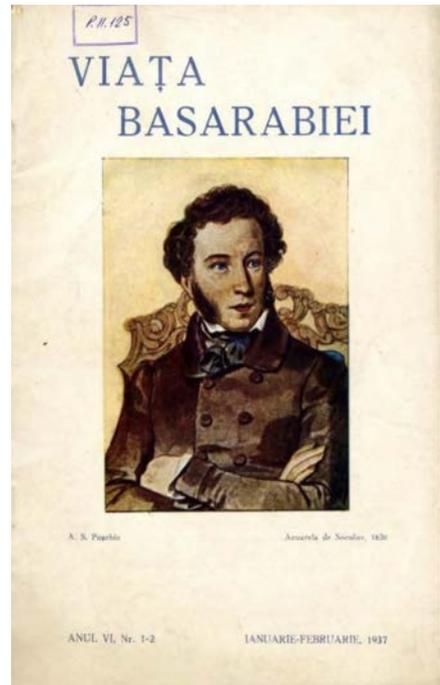


Fig. 2a. Cover, no. 1, of the literary and social magazine *Viața Basarabiei* (1932), featuring an image of the Pushkin monument on one of the side alleys of the city garden in Chișinău (source: Internet Archive).

Fig. 2b. Cover, nos. 1–2, of the literary and social magazine *Viața Basarabiei* (1937), featuring a portrait of Pushkin based on a watercolor by P. F. Sokolov (1830) (source: Internet Archive).

Bessarabian (in the book: Romanian) writers. This concern had been the focus of many earlier publications, along with Pushkin's attitude toward Moldovans in general. Through the prism of these two themes, discussions concerned not only creative influence but also the question of who—the Russian poet or Romanian writers—was superior in terms of talent and impact on their national literary canon. Dvoichenko argued that Pushkin generally sympathized with Moldovans and that his acquaintance with the local intelligentsia only strengthened this feeling.<sup>42</sup>

A more reserved view of Pushkin's sympathies was expressed by A. Boldur, who devoted a chapter to the poet's "southern exile" in his historical overview of the region under Russian rule, published in Chișinău in 1940 (the same text had appeared a year earlier in *Viața Basarabiei*).<sup>43</sup> Emphasizing the disorder, "archaism," and "Asian character" of the city in the 1820s, Boldur nevertheless insisted that the atmosphere of the region was unique and highly valuable to the

<sup>42</sup> Dvoicenco, *Pușkin și România*, 15.

<sup>43</sup> A. V. Boldur, *Contribuții la studiul istoriei românilor. Istoria Basarabiei*, vol. III: *Sub dominațiunea rusească (1812–1918)* (Chișinău: Tipografia „Tiparul Moldovenesc”, 1940), 49–55.

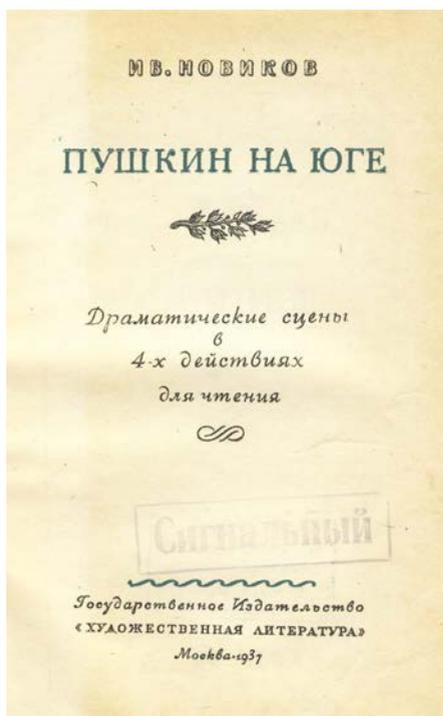
poetic inspiration of the young genius. He argued that Pushkin did not in fact belong to the imperial elite but was a singular creator who stood apart from any society and valued freedom above all else. This interpretation made Pushkin relatively acceptable to Romanian-speaking readers in the interwar period, while at the same time proving surprisingly compatible with the position of Soviet literary critics and propagandists.

The history of Pushkin's "appropriation" in the "land of the Soviets" was far more intense. In the Soviet Union of the 1920s, including Moscow and the newly renamed Leningrad, the official canon rejected the cultural idols of the tsarist era in favor of a new post-revolutionary aesthetic and the struggle against Russian nationalism. This new canon initially marginalized the classics of Russian literature, of which Pushkin was the prime example. Yet already in the 1930s, especially in the second half of the decade, Pushkin "made a triumphant return" to the top of the Soviet cultural pantheon, thanks to the radically altered national policy under Stalin, which promoted the Russian people as "first among equals" and implied repression of local forms of nationalism.

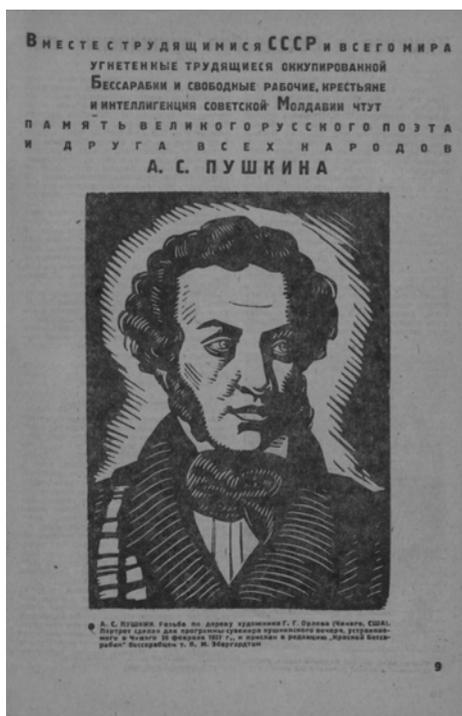
Within this "old-new" Soviet canon, Pushkin was proclaimed, among other things, a fighter against tsarist tyranny and a forerunner of the 1917 revolution. The culmination of Stalin's cult of the poet was the grand centenary of Pushkin's death in 1937, declared a "truly nationwide cultural celebration." Tragically, this all-Union glorification of the "singer of freedom" coincided with the peak of the Great Terror, for which Stalin himself was responsible. Preparations for the jubilee lasted several years, and in 1937, it was accompanied by the mass renaming of public spaces throughout the USSR in honor of the poet, as well as by an unprecedented number of publications devoted to him. Many of these, such as the works of I. Novikov, focused on the poet's "southern exile" and later became classic (Fig. 3a).<sup>44</sup> In this way, they continued the pre-revolutionary practice of intellectual "exploration" of Pushkin in Bessarabia and Novorossia by authors who did not come from the region. Later works in central Soviet journals likewise paid attention to this topic. In parallel with the Red Army's temporary occupation of Bessarabia in 1940, publications about Pushkin helped sustain the discourse of a "liberated country."<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> In 1937, I. A. Novikov, a member of the commission for the study of Pushkin's work, published a collection of dramatic texts on the theme of Pushkin "in the South"; see Ivan Novikov, *Pushkin na iuge: dramaticheskie stseny v 4-kh deistviiakh dlia chteniia* [*Pushkin in the South: Dramatic Scenes in Four Acts, for Reading*] (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1937). In 1944, after visiting Pushkin's places in the Caucasus and Ukraine, he published a fictionalized biography of the poet (a novel of the same title), which later became part of the well-known Soviet diptych *Pushkin v izgnanii* [*Pushkin in Exile*], first published in 1947. This diptych also included the novel *Pushkin v Mikhailovskom* [*Pushkin in Mikhailovskoe*], first published in 1936 and written after the author's visit to the poet's museum-reserve in the Pskov region in 1924. The novel *Pushkin v Moskve* [*Pushkin in Moscow*], on which Novikov worked from 1947 to 1957, remained unfinished due to the author's death in 1959.

<sup>45</sup> L. Larskii, "Osvobozhdennaia strana" ["Liberated Country"], *Oktiabr'*, no. 10 (1940): 155–158.



**Fig. 3a.** Cover of the book Ivan Novikov, *Pushkin na iuge: dramaticheskie stseny v 4-kh deistviiakh dlia chteniia* [Pushkin in the South: Dramatic Scenes in Four Acts, for Reading] (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1937).



**Fig. 3b.** Festive poster inside the jubilee issue no. 2, 1937, of the journal *Krasnaia Bessarabia* [Red Bessarabia], dedicated to Pushkin (p. 9).

In the part of the region controlled by the USSR, the 1937 anniversary was also widely celebrated. The commemorative events in Soviet Odesa were more on the modest side than those in Moscow and Leningrad, but they likewise lasted several days and included numerous academic and public engagements.<sup>46</sup> Other Ukrainian cities and villages that the poet had visited during his “southern exile” also came under the attention of Soviet Ukrainian Pushkin scholars and propagandists. In this regard, it is worth mentioning the collection of folk tales about the poet’s life in Kamenka, a village near Kyiv, which was published to commemorate the anniversary.<sup>47</sup> Such works were intended to demonstrate that, despite the complexity of his texts and a noble origin, Pushkin was close and dear

<sup>46</sup> See the chronicle of the jubilee Pushkin celebrations in Odesa in A.V. Nedzvedskii, “Pushkinskii iubilei 1937 g. v Odesse” [“Pushkin Anniversary Celebration in Odesa”], in *Pushkin na iuge: trudy pushkinskikh konferentsii Kishineva i Odessy* [Pushkin in the South: Proceedings of the Pushkin Conferences in Chişinău and Odesa], 347–359 (Chişinău: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo MSSR, 1958).

<sup>47</sup> See *Pushkin, Shevchenko, Gor’kii v narodnikh perekazakh* [Pushkin, Shevchenko, and Gorky in Popular Retellings.], recorded by Dm. Kosaryk (Kyiv: Mystetstvo, 1937), 9–20.

to ordinary people, and that the living memory of him in the places of his exile had been passed down for several generations. This genre also recorded ethnographic observations about places and houses where the poet had lived, as well as local legends associated with them. In this way, anniversary publications emphasized that by restoring sites connected to Pushkin (for example, the so-called “Green House” in Kamenka), the Soviet authorities were honoring not only the poet himself but also the people’s love for him.

The 1937 Pushkin anniversary was celebrated more modestly in the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, created by the Soviet authorities back in 1924, than in Ukraine, due to the limited resources and small size of the republic itself. Soviet propaganda presented the jubilee as a unique opportunity granted by the state to Moldovans who were building “their socialist culture” within the “free family of Soviet peoples.”<sup>48</sup> Agitators emphasized the enthusiasm of “Moldovan workers” and collective farmers for Pushkin’s work.<sup>49</sup> On the occasion of the anniversary, the latter organized literary evenings, delivered lectures and public readings of Pushkin’s texts, and staged performances of his works. The celebration of Pushkin in the Moldavian ASSR was intended to reflect the republic’s acceptance of the Soviet canon of the poet. Socialist Moldovan culture was a political project, created in competition with the culture of Romanian Bessarabia, a territory which the Soviet Union openly claimed. The MASSR intelligentsia was also drawn into the celebrations. The reading of Pushkin’s works from the stage of the Gorky Drama Theater in Tiraspol on February 10, 1937, served several purposes. First, it was meant to demonstrate the existence of a Moldovan Soviet intelligentsia engaged in literary activity (an experiment in itself).<sup>50</sup> Second, the reading of translations of Pushkin’s texts into the Moldovan language was intended to promote this language, also a project of the Soviets. According to the creators of Soviet national modern cultures, Moldovan language was distinct from the Romanian one.<sup>51</sup> The publication of Pushkin’s works translated into Moldovan, sometimes printed in Cyrillic, served the same goal.

<sup>48</sup> A. V. Nedzvedskii, “Pushkinskii iubilei 1937 g. v Moldavskoi ASSR” [“The Pushkin Jubilee of 1937 in the Moldavian ASSR”], in *Pushkin na iuge: trudy pushkinskikh konferentsii Kishineva i Odessa*, 342–345 (Kishinev: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo MSSR, 1958).

<sup>49</sup> Mikhail Demidov, “Pushkin — liubimets kolkhoznoi Moldavii” [“Pushkin—the Favorite of Moldova’s Collective Farm Workers”] *Krasnaia Bessarabiia*, no. 2 (1937): 14.

<sup>50</sup> On the project of creating a Moldovan Soviet “writing intelligentsia,” see Petru Negură, *Nici eroi, nici trădători. Scriitorii moldoveni și puterea sovietică în epoca stalinistă* [Neither Heroes nor Traitors: Moldovan Writers and Soviet Power in the Stalinist Era] (Chișinău: Cartier, 2014), 71–132.

<sup>51</sup> It is noteworthy that from 1932 to 1938 the Moldavian ASSR cultivated the Moldovan language on the basis of the Latin script, later abandoning this experiment in favor of Cyrillic as a result of the radical shift in Soviet nationality policy under Stalin. See Alexandr Voronovici, *The Ambiguities of Soviet “Piedmonts”: Soviet Borderland Policies in the Ukrainian SSR and the Moldovan ASSR, 1922–1934* (PhD diss., Central European University, 2016), 372–383.



The relatively peaceful, though small in its extent, celebration of the poet's 1937 anniversary in Chişinău did not go unnoticed in the Moldavian ASSR. As the jubilee approached, Soviet propagandists used the question of how the poet's memory was being treated under Romanian rule for political purposes. Contrasting the two states on opposite banks of the Dniester river, they claimed that "on the right bank of the Dniester, the occupiers were running wild, seeking in every possible way to persecute the memory of the poet."<sup>52</sup> In 1937, the Moscow-based journal of the Central Council of the Bessarabian Society, *Krasnaia Bessarabia* (*Red Bessarabia*), published under the slogan "Hands off from Bessarabia, Romanian invaders!" devoted a series of articles to the poet and his years in Chişinău (Fig. 3b). Among other concerns, articles there suggested that, despite opposition from the Romanian authorities, the ordinary people of the entire Bessarabia cherished thoughts and feelings about Pushkin during 1937, while "the Romanian occupiers, displaying a visceral fear of everything Russian," resisted any commemoration of the poet. The renaming of Pushkin Street in Chişinău to King Carol I Street in 1924 was interpreted as an act of blasphemy, and all publications about the poet in Romanian Bessarabia were declared falsifications.<sup>53</sup> As for the "southern exile" itself, Moldovan Soviet authors claimed that Pushkin could not have had warm feelings for the periphery, which was under the yoke of tsarism, and that he communicated with Russian officers and civil servants only out of necessity, in contrast to the ordinary Moldovans.

### Professionalization of the Field (1944–1964)

World War II brought not only unprecedented destruction of infrastructure and massive population losses across Europe, but also another shift in the "belonging" of disputed territories. Bessarabia was one of them. As a result of the defeat of the Axis powers and their allies (including the Kingdom of Romania) by the anti-Hitler coalition (which included the USSR), Bessarabia again fell under a long-term regime change in 1944. It was transformed from a Romanian province into the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, a Soviet republic composed of the united territories on both the right and left banks of the Dniester River. The Soviet regime introduced policies that differed radically from those of the previous administration. These included "purging" of potentially disloyal groups, economic restructuring, and radical changes in cultural and language policy.<sup>54</sup> In this context, Pushkin became a key instrument through which the Soviet authorities sought to indoctrinate the local population and integrate it into the canon of Soviet culture and the values promoted by the regime. Through Pushkin, the regime addressed both the intelligentsia and the "working masses."

<sup>52</sup> Nedzvedskii, "Pushkinskii iubilei 1937 g.," 345.

<sup>53</sup> E. Arbore, "Pushkin i rumynskaia literatura" ["Pushkin and Romanian Literature"], *Krasnaia Bessarabiia*, no. 2 (Moscow, 1937): 13.

<sup>54</sup> On how the Sovietization of Bessarabia went see Haynes, *Moldova*, 138–145.

In the early postwar years and until Stalin's death in 1953, the Soviet authorities in the MSSR relied on Pushkin as never before. During the first decade of its existence, the patchwork territorial entity formed from the former Romanian province and former Ukrainian territory—"united Soviet Moldova"—lacked internal cohesion. The Soviet authorities pursued a policy aimed at bringing the two "Moldovan" territories closer together, both infrastructurally and culturally, and used Pushkin for this task. In the postwar context, when the regime was still constructing a version of a "usable past" for the recently annexed Bessarabian territory, Stalin's cult of Pushkin provided a relatively "safe" ground for promoting Soviet cultural policy.

In the late 1940s, against the backdrop of the widespread destruction of infrastructure in Chişinău and elsewhere, Pushkin also served the discourse of victorious reconstruction and a return to peaceful life. The 1946 plan for the city's reconstruction, designed by A. Shchusev, who was invited to Chişinău as a renowned Soviet architect tasked with reviving his hometown, also mentioned the poet. Shchusev proposed connecting different parts of the city with new boulevards, or "rays," one of which was to bear Pushkin's name. This "ray" was intended to link the so-called "lower city" with the downtown. Naming it after the poet was justified by "topographical authenticity," since it was in this area that Pushkin had lived in 1820–21 after his arrival in the city. The plan was never realized, but the poet's name was clearly present in the architectural visions for the city's reconstruction and, throughout the late Stalinist period, kept appearing on planned boulevards that were never built.<sup>55</sup>

The story of the 1946 "rescue" of Naumov's Inn, where Pushkin had stayed in 1820–21 and where a museum dedicated to the poet was opened two years later, served several purposes (Fig. 4a). First, it linked Moldova to other Pushkin sites across the USSR that had been under German occupation during the war. Stalin's cult elevated Pushkin to the status of an all-Soviet sacred commodity, giving the wartime liberation of Pushkin sites and their postwar restoration an almost religious meaning.<sup>56</sup> The reconstruction of Pushkin's "tiny house" in the former "lower" Chişinău became part of the anti-fascist narrative.<sup>57</sup> Second, the

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, a later version of the city reconstruction plan from 1953 in the National Agency of Archives of the Republic of Moldova (ANARM), fond 3095, inventory 1-NT, case 95, folio 13.

<sup>56</sup> On the "sacralization" of the liberation of Pushkin sites and museums after the war, see Anastasia Felcher, "New Sites of Worship: Sovietization and Literary Museums in Western Borderlands, 1940–1979," in *Transforming Author Museums: From Sites of Pilgrimage to Cultural Hubs*, ed. Ulrike Spring, Johan Schimanski, and Thea Aarbakke (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2021), 199–201.

<sup>57</sup> The 1946 reconstruction project of the house and the surrounding grounds is available in archival holdings; see ANARM, fond 2094, inventory 1, especially the introduction to the collection. Reconstruction work in the museum continued after its opening, for example in 1953–54, when the building required major repairs; see A. T. Borshch, "Dom-muzei A. S. Pushkina v Kishineve," ["Pushkin House-Museum in Kishinev"] in *Pushkin na iuge*, 371.



creation of the poet's house-museum fit neatly into the discourse that it was the Soviet state that granted access to Pushkin to the masses of admirers of his work. This made way for the image of the poet as a fighter for freedom, who had suffered both under the tsarist regime and under the "Romanian occupiers." Third, the regime signaled to the intelligentsia—especially to the newly established Union of Writers of the Moldavian SSR—that Pushkin was a subject that could not be ignored from either an academic or an ideological standpoint.



**Fig. 4a.** The house where A. Pushkin lived in 1820-21 as it was discovered after the Second World War, photo from 1946 (source: ANARM, photo collection, item 234).<sup>58</sup>

It was on the initiative of spokesmen of the local Writers' Union, at least officially, that in 1946 the republic's highest leadership decided to establish a museum. It took two years to prepare the exhibition, and the museum was opened on February 10, 1948, the anniversary of the poet's death. Chişinău had a unique exhibit—the house itself—but the question of the exhibition was still an unresolved one. The Institute of Russian Literature of the USSR Academy of Sciences (the Pushkin House) in Leningrad provided exhibition materials.<sup>59</sup> Thanks to these exhibits, which told the story of the poet's biography from birth to his death in a duel, the exhibition welcomed the public after the reconstruction of the building and the surrounding area was partially completed. Timed to coincide

<sup>58</sup> The author expresses her deepest gratitude to the director of ANARM, Dr. Igor Caşu, for informing her about relevant photographic material on the topic of this research in the holdings of the archive, and to Lilia Felcher for her assistance in locating and copying this material.

<sup>59</sup> Borshch, "Dom-muzei A. S. Pushkina v Kishineve," 370.

with the one hundred and eleventh anniversary of Pushkin's death, the original exhibition consisted of 53 items (Fig. 4b), mainly literary and photographic materials. Until 1958, two years after Khrushchev's report "On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences," the exhibition also included quotations from Stalin about the poet.<sup>60</sup>

However, despite its ideological importance, like many cultural institutions of the immediate postwar years, the newly established museum faced serious difficulties due to scarce and limited resources. Visitor numbers were high, original exhibits were barely available, and the poor condition of the streets around the museum created an environment far from ideal, in which it was difficult to carry out proper work.<sup>61</sup> Over time, another problem became apparent: the exhibition materials provided by Leningrad did not inform visitors in details about "Pushkin in Moldavia" topic, although this was the museum's main concern. In response, the museum administration "invented" an entire iconography for this topic. For example, it commissioned paintings of "the poet's Kishinev period." This visual imagery positioned in popular consciousness the image of good-natured Moldovans with whom the poet, dressed in metropolitan attire, socialized in gardens and vineyards. In this way, the topic of Pushkin in Chişinău also contributed to "creating the Moldovans"—an ideological project in which the Soviet authorities ultimately succeeded only partially.<sup>62</sup>

The museum opened a year before the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the poet's birth, which was widely celebrated throughout the USSR in 1949. The anniversary provided an additional incentive for the public to visit the modest exhibition in the newly opened museum-house and also triggered a large-scale campaign in the local press. Newspaper articles were once again telling the stories of the poet's "southern exile," stressing that it was in Moldova that his "revolutionary spirit" strengthened. They also emphasized Pushkin's role in "fostering Soviet

<sup>60</sup> A draft of the brochure-guide to the Pushkin House-Museum in Chişinău, prepared by the museum staff in 1958, indicated the presence of quotations from the heads of the Soviet state in the exhibition; see ANARM, fond 2904, inventory 1, case 70, folio 3. By contrast, the version of the same guide published in 1959 no longer mentioned them; see A. Sukhomlinov and D. Gurtovaiia, eds., *Kratkii putevoditel' po domu-muzeiu A. S. Pushkina v Kishineve* [*A Short Guide to the A. S. Pushkin House-Museum in Kishinev*] (Chişinău: Cartea moldovenească, 1959). The disappearance of Stalin's quotations from the museum display was a direct consequence of de-Stalinization and the "Khrushchev Thaw," the effects of which took some time to become apparent in Soviet Moldova.

<sup>61</sup> ANARM, fond 2904, inventory 1, case 62, folio 1. On the shortage of original exhibits, see the report of the Moscow commission from 1951 on its communication with the museum's first director, B. Trubetskoi, Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), fond 631, inventory 5, case 1065, fond 26. On the number of guided tours and visitors, see Borshch, "Dom-muzei A. S. Pushkina v Kishineve," 370.

<sup>62</sup> On Soviet attempts to "invent" a Moldovan nation in the MSSR, see Charles King, *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2000), 91–119; Haynes, *Moldova*, 146–148



**Fig. 4b.** “Pupils from Secondary School No. 34 (Young Pioneers) at the Pushkin Museum for the Museum’s Fifth Anniversary”, photo from 1953 (source: ANARM, photo collection, item 22457).

patriotism” among present-day residents of the MSSR. The anniversary became an occasion to rename a number of cultural institutions in honor of the poet, as well as the central park, where his bust had stood untouched throughout two world wars. Chişinău’s Pushkin Street had been renamed back after the poet five years earlier, as soon as Soviet troops occupied the region for good.

On the occasion of the anniversary, the mansion of the boyar family Ralli in Dolna village, in relative proximity to the capital, which the poet had briefly visited back in 1821, was opened to the public. The mansion had been somewhat restored in advance, and a memorial plaque installed on its walls.<sup>63</sup> After 1944, the estate, including the boyar mansion, was nationalized, and a collective farm named after the poet was established in the village. These measures, together with establishing a rural club and library in the estate buildings, were intended to emphasize the grassroots character of Pushkin’s veneration in the periphery, now heavily promoted by the Soviet authorities. On the occasion of the 1949 festivities, popular celebrations were organized and the village itself was renamed Pushkino. These symbolic gestures were accompanied by broader infrastructural changes, including the opening of a power plant in the village. Although the boyar mansion had in fact been built decades after Pushkin’s visit, in the 1840s,<sup>64</sup> it nevertheless

<sup>63</sup> Valentina Grabovskaia, “Okruženie semeistva Zamfira Ralli i A. S. Pushkin” [“The Milieu of the Zamira Ralli Family and A. S. Pushkin”], in *Personalități basarabene – parte a patrimoniului cultural-istoric național (secolul XIX – prima jumătate a secolului al XX-lea)* [Bessarabian Personalities — Part of the National Cultural-Historical Heritage (19th Century – First Half of the 20th Century)] (Chişinău, 2023), 85.

<sup>64</sup> V. Molkosian, “Rukopis’ Ralli-Arbure o Pushkine” [“The Manuscript of Ralli-Arbure about Pushkin”], in *Vremennik pushkinskoi komissii*, no. 24 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1991), 98–99, 103.

became a centerpiece of the anniversary commemoration. More generally, the celebrations emphasized the significance of the local landscape that preserved the memory of the poet. Also, it was reported that local residents allegedly kept transmitting legends about Pushkin from generation to generation.

With the onset of the Cold War, the confrontation between the USSR and Western countries intensified, which one could notice in interpretations of the poet during the 1949 celebrations. The anniversary took place amid a campaign against “cosmopolitans” and “bourgeois ideology,” which condemned “deference to the West” in all its forms. Whereas in 1937 the Soviet canon had promoted Pushkin’s greatness by stressing the global importance of his legacy, in 1949 the poet was proclaimed a defender of the dignity of the Russian people and an “ally in the struggle against cosmopolitanism.”<sup>65</sup> In this context, Pushkin’s biography was again reinterpreted, especially claims that he was a product of the European Enlightenment. Several of the poet’s works in which European influence was most obvious were subjected, if not to outright criticism, then to ideological rethinking. The same was true about the poet’s later writings, especially the poem “To the Slanderers of Russia.” Written in the aftermath of the Polish uprising of 1830–1831 in defense of Russian geopolitical interests in Central Europe,<sup>66</sup> the poem got a new meaning during the Cold War. In 1949, at the initiative of Soviet Pushkin scholars, it was made to be a manifest that exposed “ostentatious and hypocritical” American democracy.<sup>67</sup>

Under these conditions, local Pushkin scholars, especially in the newly annexed Soviet territories, had their own challenges. They had not only to produce research that conformed to Soviet methodological standards, but also to define and clearly state their relationship to the existing local knowledge about the poet, and do this relatively quickly. The main monographs on the subject appeared fairly soon after the 1944 annexation of Bessarabia by the USSR, within five to seven years.<sup>68</sup> These works emphasized a clear rupture between the local Soviet tradition of Pushkin studies in the making and approaches to the poet’s legacy from earlier

<sup>65</sup> Olga Voronina, “‘The Sun of World Poetry’: Pushkin as a Cold War Writer,” *Pushkin Review / Pushkinskii Vestnik* 14 (2011): 64; Aleksandr Samarin, “‘Drug svobody, nepovinnyi v lzhi i zlobe nashikh dnei’: pushkinskaia rech’ S. I. Vavilova v Kolonnom zale Doma Soiuzov” [“A Friend of Freedom, Uncompromised by the Lies and Malice of Our Times’: S. I. Vavilov’s Pushkin Address in the Column Hall of the House of Unions”], *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, no. 167 (1/2021).

<sup>66</sup> On Pushkin’s original text, see Edyta M. Bojanowska, “Pushkin’s ‘To the Slanderers of Russia’: The Slavic Question, Imperial Anxieties, and Geopolitics,” *Pushkin Review* 21 (2019): 11–33; Katya Hokanson, “In Defense of Empire: ‘The Bronze Horseman’ and ‘To the Slanderers of Russia,’” in *Beyond the Empire: Images of Russia in the Eurasian Cultural Context*, 149–166 (Hokkaido University, no. 17, 2008).

<sup>67</sup> Voronina, “‘The Sun of World Poetry,’” 74.

<sup>68</sup> W. P. van Meurs, *The Bessarabian Question in Communist Historiography: Nationalist and Communist Politics and History-Writing* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 281–282.



decades. Everything previously written on the topic was subjected to critical review to establish a new methodological and ideological framework, different from “pre-revolutionary, simplistic and vulgarizing” approaches to the subject. Newly appeared Pushkin scholars in the Moldavian SSR presented themselves as guardians of the only correct paradigm, asserting that “only now, in Soviet Moldavia, has a truly serious study of the topic ‘Pushkin in Moldova’ begun.”<sup>69</sup> It was claimed that the tsarist authorities had “done everything to erase the memory of Pushkin from the people’s consciousness,” as had the Romanian administration in Bessarabia.<sup>70</sup> At the same time, the “southern exile” was unanimously declared one of the “most important and interesting” in Pushkin’s life, and the hierarchy between the Russian and Moldovan/Romanian poetic traditions was from now on set up clearly: “Eminescu considered himself a student of the great Russian poet.”<sup>71</sup> Starting from 1954, academic conferences of Pushkin specialists “from the South” were held in Chişinău and Odesa, organized by the Pushkin Committee and the Odesa House of Scientists. The conference proceedings, published in 1958 and 1961, ensured that a wide audience was familiar with the issues discussed there.<sup>72</sup>

Unlike earlier periods, public discourse about Pushkin in Soviet Chişinău was almost entirely dominated by professional Pushkin scholars. Working in academic institutions and museums, they were also the main authors of public articles about the poet. Since printing was fully controlled by the state, newspaper publications were subject to strict censorship. Under these conditions, Pushkin scholars ensured that press coverage of the poet’s stay in the region followed the ideologically approved “line.” In the late Stalin era, the goal was to bring public discourse in the Moldavian SSR into line with that of the Soviet Union as a whole. This meant conceptualizing the idea of Pushkin as a harbinger of freedom. In this regard, the Soviet regime would once again be emphasized as the one providing the masses this “correct” interpretation and thus liberating them from “mistaken beliefs” of the previous regimes. Occasional press reports quoted episodes from Pushkin’s exile, but the “spicy” details popular in earlier decades disappeared from print. This changed somewhat during the years of the Khrushchev Thaw, when newspaper articles became less rigidly ideological and somewhat more entertaining, although the authors remained the same.

The press also actively promoted scholarly works on the subject. Boris Trubetskoy’s first article, “Pushkin in Moldova,” was published in the republican

<sup>69</sup> B. Trubetskoi, *Pushkin v Moldavii. Dopolnennoe izdanie* [Pushkin in Moldova. Expanded Edition] (Chişinău: Literatura artistică, 1990), 20.

<sup>70</sup> I. K. Inzhevatov, *Pushkin i moldavskii narod* [Pushkin and Moldovan People] (Chişinău: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo Moldavii, 1949), 92.

<sup>71</sup> Inzhevatov, *Pushkin i moldavskii narod*, 54.

<sup>72</sup> *Pushkin na Iuge: Trudy pushkinskikh konferentsii Kishineva i Odessa*, vol. 1 [Pushkin in the South: Proceedings of the Pushkin Conferences of Chişinău and Odessa, Vol. 1] (Chişinău: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo MSSR, 1958); *Pushkin na Iuge: Trudy pushkinskikh konferentsii Odessa i Kishineva*, vol. 2 [Pushkin in the South: Proceedings of the Pushkin Conferences of Chişinău and Odessa, Vol. 2] (Chişinău: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo MSSR, 1961).

newspaper *Soviet Moldavia* as early as in January 1945. Thereafter, local newspapers regularly covered new publications, museum news, anniversary events, and other public festivities related to Pushkin. Until the second half of the 1950s, museum staff were also sent on lecture tours to newly formed collective farms across the republic, where they addressed workers in the spirit of the 1949 anniversary rhetoric.<sup>73</sup> The extensive use of Pushkin as an educational and ideological resource during these years, against the background of a relative absence of similar lectures on Moldovan writers, is another indicator that in the late Stalinist period, the Soviet authorities the Romanian cultural canon with suspicion and were in no hurry to adapt it to their needs.<sup>74</sup>

The situation started to change with the post-Stalinist Thaw, which coincided with a certain “rebalancing” of political forces and cultural influences within the republic. By the second half of the 1950s, the so-called “Bessarabian faction” had come to dominate the Union of Writers of the Moldavian SSR.<sup>75</sup> This group consisted of writers who came not from the MASSR (which had been Sovietized since the 1920s), but from the former Romanian territories annexed by the USSR in 1940 and 1944. For these intellectuals, the Romanian cultural canon was a familiar one, and it was on their initiative that the gradual integration of Romanian cultural heritage into the Soviet Moldovan canon began. A symbolic milestone in this process was the inauguration of the so-called Alley of Classics in the central city park in 1958.

In 1956, the executive committee of the Chișinău City Council decided to commission sculptural busts of “prominent figures of Moldovan culture of the past.” Twelve iconic historical figures, who had played an important role in social, political, and cultural development of the Moldavian principalities in the early and later modern periods, were selected to frame the central avenue of Pushkin Park.<sup>76</sup> It is noteworthy that the activity of most of them—eight out of twelve—belonged to the nineteenth century, and their works shaped the Romanian cultural canon. In order to install their busts in the center of the capital of Soviet Moldavia, one should have adjusted their biographies and reinterpret their creative legacies. This task was undertaken by members of the Writers’ Union. The design of this new park avenue presupposed moving the 1885 Pushkin bust from its original location to the center of the park. This created the visual impression that the Russian poet “dominated” the Moldovan classics, along with the ideology at the time. This way, local elites managed to use Pushkin to advance their own cultural agenda without engaging into an open conflict with the Soviet leadership.

<sup>73</sup> See, for example, the file in the Archive of Social and Political Organizations of the Republic of Moldova (AOSPRM), Fond 42, inventory 1, box 3, folio 67.

<sup>74</sup> Negură, *Nici eroi, nici trădători*, 279.

<sup>75</sup> Negură, *Nici eroi, nici trădători*, 281–84.

<sup>76</sup> These include Nicolae Milescu and Dimitrie Cantemir for the early modern period, and Constantin Stamati, Gheorghe Asachi, Constantin Negruzzi, Alexie Donici, Alexandru Hâjdeu, Alecu Russo, Vasile Alecsandri, Bogdan P. Hasdeu, Ion Creangă, and Mihai Eminescu for the late modern period.



## (Re)inventing the Periphery (1964–1989)

The next twenty-five years in the history of the USSR are known as the years of “Brezhnev’s stagnation” and “Gorbachev’s perestroika.” In both of these periods, largely different in duration, dynamics, and content, Pushkin remained an important topic for academics and other cultural professionals in the MSSR. A generational shift brought new voices and a relative diversification of topics in publications. At the same time, a growing number of public historians, or “krayevedy”, gained the chance to “study Pushkin.” The opening of the poet’s museum in the former village of Dolna in 1964 helped draw more popular interest to the subject. The site became a venue for mass festive events dedicated to the poet and to poetry, which in turn contributed significantly to the promotion of Moldova as an all-Union tourist destination. A number of places in Chişinău and across the republic related to Pushkin were granted official protected status.<sup>77</sup> In this sense, the periphery did not lag behind all-Union trends. In the 1970s and 1980s, sites associated with Pushkin were increasingly marked across the USSR as heritage, and new Pushkin museums were opened.

This was made possible in large part by the introduction of the “new regime” of cultural heritage policy during Brezhnev’s rule.<sup>78</sup> This entailed fundamental changes in legislation reflecting the “intensified heritagization of Soviet materiality.”<sup>79</sup> The initial renovation of the Ralli estate in Dolna in 1949, a memorial plaque to the poet, and the festivities held there paved the way to opening of a museum devoted to Pushkin’s stay in the former boyar mansion. The museum opened in 1964, in the final year of the Khrushchev Thaw. As sixteen years earlier in Chişinău, the future museum faced a lack of exhibits. Assistance again came from Leningrad, where the All-Union Museum of A. S. Pushkin had been established in 1953, bringing together materials formerly held in the Pushkin House and those displayed at anniversary exhibitions in Leningrad and Moscow.<sup>80</sup> Institutional reforms in Leningrad meant that this new museum institution acquired an unprecedented number of memorial, iconographic, and historical items related to the poet.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>77</sup> See the list of locations in V. Tymchishin, *Pushkinskie mesta v Moldove* [*Pushkin Sites in Moldova*] (Kishinev: Timpul, 1973).

<sup>78</sup> On Soviet cultural heritage policy during the Brezhnev era, see Julie Deschepper, “The Golden Age of Soviet Heritage: An Alternative Presentism?,” in *Time and Material Culture: Rethinking Soviet Temporalities*, ed. Julie Deschepper, Antony Kalashnikov, and Federica Rossi (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2025), 55–74.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> With the exception of the poet’s manuscripts and library, see N. I. Granovskaia, *Vsesoiuznyi muzei A. S. Pushkina: ocherk-putevoditel’* [*The All-Union A. S. Pushkin Museum: An Essay-Guide*] (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1985), 6–7.

<sup>81</sup> From 1953 to 1967, the All-Union A. S. Pushkin Museum did not have its own building, and its exhibition was housed in seventeen halls of the State Hermitage (the former Winter Palace) in Leningrad.

Engravings, lithographs, nineteenth-century books, and copies of Pushkin's manuscripts were transferred to Dolna.<sup>82</sup> These formed the basis of the museum's exhibition, and in 1969 the site became a branch of the poet's house-museum in Chişinău. The opening of the museum in Pushkino was preceded by a three-month traveling exhibition entitled "Pushkin in the South," mounted in various cities of the Moldavian SSR by the Leningrad museum in cooperation with the republic's Ministry of Culture.<sup>83</sup> The exhibition was demonstrated outside the capital in order to educate collective farmers and students in the regions, which echoed the practice of traveling lectures on the poet that had been widespread since the late 1940s.

For the opening of the museum in Pushkino, an artificial mound was created near the estate, on which a monument to Pushkin by the sculptor M. Manizer was installed (Fig. 5a). Due to the short lifespan of the material used, the monument deteriorated quickly and was replaced after only eight years. By that time, cultural diplomacy between Moscow and the Soviet republics had reached a new dimension. The topic of "friendly language and literary ties" as well as cultural exchange became standardized. Until the perestroika, this was a relatively unproblematic topic that framed cultural exchange. In this context, Pushkin's stay in Chişinău, Odesa, and the region more broadly offered many opportunities for events and thematic activities.

In June 1972 (the month of Pushkin's birth), the Days of Literature and Art of the RSFSR were held in the MSSR, with large-scale events and prominent guests coming from Moscow. The celebration was timed to another reconstruction of the Ralli estate in Pushkino, the renewal of the exhibition, and the installation of a new monument on the museum grounds. This time, it was authored by O. Komov (Fig. 5b), a sculptor who made many monuments to Pushkin across the USSR. After the reconstruction of the 1970s, the Ralli estate got more elements of "Moldovan folk style" in its late Soviet interpretation, and the exhibition added historical interiors. An important outcome of the 1972 festivities was the transformation of the Pushkino estate into a venue for large-scale literary festivals. The first official Republican Poetry Festival had been held two years earlier, in June 1970, to mark the 150th anniversary of the poet's arrival in Bessarabia.<sup>84</sup> However, it was the organizational success of the 1972 events that demonstrated

<sup>82</sup> Grabovskaia, "Okruzhenie semeistva Zamfira Ralli," 86.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> The Republican Poetry Festival concluded a series of events marking the anniversary of the poet's arrival in Bessarabia. The commemorative campaign of the early 1970s included numerous newspaper and journal articles, addresses by scholars and writers in mass media, public lectures and academic conferences at the Academy of Sciences of the MSSR, the Union of Writers, Chişinău University, and other institutions. An exhibition was also opened at the Union of Writers, displaying not only texts attesting to the veneration of the poet in the MSSR but also paintings and graphic works; see B. A. Trubetskoi, "Pushkinskie dni v Moldavii" ["Pushkin Days in Moldavia"], *Vremennik Pushkinskoi komissii* (Leningrad, "Nauka", 1974), 155–156.



the ability of local organizers to host high-level guests and multi-day festivals. Since then (with some interruptions), poetry festivals have been held annually, fostering a network of professional and amateur audience and sustaining interest in the Pushkin. They also ensured a steady flow of tourists to the estate and to Pushkin sites in and around Chişinău.



**Fig. 5a.** Monument to A. S. Pushkin near the Ralli estate (the poet's museum) in the village of Pushkino in 1964; the monument has not been preserved (photograph from 1968; source: ANARM, photo collection, item 1-4640).



**Fig. 5b.** Monument to A. S. Pushkin on the grounds of the Ralli estate (the poet's museum) in 1972; the monument has been preserved to the present day (photograph from 1977; source: ANARM, photo collection, item 1007 (1701)).

Important developments also took place in the capital. As part of the celebrations marking the anniversary of Pushkin's arrival in Bessarabia, three historic buildings associated with the poet were granted protected status in 1971, as well as memorial plaques.<sup>85</sup> The house-museum in Chişinău likewise became part of the effort to turn Pushkin into a resource for mass local and inter-republican tourism. This guaranteed a continuous visitor flow, but also encouraged plans to expand the exhibition. In 1972, a bust of Pushkin by the sculptor V. Anikushin, portraying the poet in his early youth, was installed in the square of the house-museum. Together with the new monument in Pushkino, this act of heritage-making echoed developments elsewhere in the USSR. During the Brezhnev "stagnation" years (and even afterward), Pushkin museums in the RSFSR aimed at turning all places visited by the poet into museums, significantly expanding the

<sup>85</sup> According to B. Trubetskoi ("Pushkinskie dni v Moldavii"), in 1971, by decision of the Council of Ministers of the MSSR, the following sites in Chişinău were placed under state protection: the former house of the boyar Varfolomei, the house of M. Katsika (where the Masonic lodge "Ovidii" was located in the 1820s), the house of Vice-Governor T. Krupenskii, and other places linked to Pushkin.

network of regional Pushkin sites.<sup>86</sup> As in the MSSR, these new museums often hosted literary festivals and celebrations, to which Moldovan colleagues were invited.

During these decades, the Chişinău house-museum significantly expanded its collection. This encouraged plans to enlarge the exhibition and restore the premises, as it was also happening in other republics, such as Lithuania and its Pushkin Literary Museum in Vilnius. The large-scale reconstruction of the house-museum in Chişinău in 1985–87 altered not only the building's exterior but also its conceptual content. From then on, the house was meant to convey visually the atmosphere and architecture of the early nineteenth century. The exterior was altered, and inside a memorial exhibition was installed, with pieces of furniture that were supposed to evoke the poet's first months in Chişinău. The exhibition on Pushkin's biography and its context was expanded and moved to adjacent buildings.

Against the background of the rapid growth of Pushkin museums across the USSR, regional museum staff faced new challenges. They had to once again emphasize the uniqueness of their own sites and collections. As before, this was achieved by elaborating on the topic of "Pushkin in Moldavia." Under the new conditions, museum workers increasingly focused on the historical context of the poet's "southern exile," shifting attention from the general biography of Pushkin to the formative role of the early 1820s in his creative development.

This also affected scholarship. From the late 1960s, local Pushkin specialists were expected to secure their position within the expanded framework of Pushkin studies. This was accomplished through focusing more on the Moldovan context, sometimes loosely connected to the poet. Studies were devoted to Moldovan folklore, biographies of Pushkin's acquaintances, and the history of his veneration in the "southern region."<sup>87</sup> Compared to the 1950s, the new generation of scholars enjoyed somewhat greater political latitude in their choice of topics and actively published not only monographs but from the 1970s onward also articles in the "thick" journals. Yet the strict hierarchy of Soviet Pushkin studies still confined local scholars largely to the Moldovan theme, and certain dissatisfaction with this limitation gradually began to surface in print.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>86</sup> For example, in 1971, the *A. S. Pushkin Literary and Local History Museum* was opened in Bernovo (Tver Region) in the Wulf family estate; in 1972 a Pushkin museum dedicated to the poet's travels was opened in Torzhok (also in the Tver Region) in a historic mansion; and two years later, in 1974, a museum dedicated to Arina Rodionovna, the poet's peasant-born nanny, entitled *House of A. Pushkin's Nanny* established in the village of Kobrino (Leningrad Region).

<sup>87</sup> During the years of the Pushkin cult in the MSSR, a significant body of creative works about the poet were written. These poems and prose texts were already the subject of literary analysis in the 1950s, yet later works were marked by less straightforward political engagement. A new generation of Moldovan Pushkin scholars collected, published, and analyzed this material; see A. Korkina and M. Khazin, comps., "... *Sviashchenna dlia dushi poeta...*": *Stikhi, stat'i, esse (Proizvedeniia literatorov Moldavii ob A. S. Pushkine)* ["... *Sacred to the Poet's Soul...*": *Poems, Articles, Essays (Works by Moldovan Writers about A. S. Pushkin)*] (Chişinău, Literatură artistică, 1987).

<sup>88</sup> See B. Trubetskoi, "Pushkin i nekotorye problemy russko-moldavskikh mezhnatsional'nykh



In the 1970s, plans were discussed to establish a “Pushkin zone” around the house-museum in Chişinău, which would turn the surrounding streets into a protected area themed after the early 19th century. The architect Robert Kurtz championed the project, but after he died in 1980, it remained to exist on paper only. Nevertheless, this initiative is indicative of the fact that in late Soviet urban planning design, Pushkin was perceived as having considerable potential in terms of “generating heritage” and attracting tourists. The house-museum also took the lead in organizing celebrations for the poet’s 150th birthday in 1987. Yet this anniversary, having coincided with the peak of perestroika, proved ambiguous in terms of the integrity of the Pushkin cult.<sup>89</sup>

It is noteworthy that from the 1960s onward, a so-called “quiet Romanianization” of the cultural elites unfolded in the Moldavian SSR.<sup>90</sup> The Soviet authorities largely ignored this, having achieved their territorial and political goals after the war. Until perestroika, this process had little impact on publications about Pushkin. From the second half of the 1980s, however, the “Pushkin topic” in Chişinău and beyond started to acquire explicit anti-imperial overtones. Although limited to certain intellectual circles and closely linked to dissatisfaction with the dominance of the Russian language in the public sphere and education in the republic, these sentiments were part of a broader fatigue with the Pushkin cult imposed by the Soviet system.

Alternative readings of the poet had appeared earlier in Soviet dissident circles, in samizdat, and abroad. Two emblematic examples were Andrei Bitov’s 1971 novel *Pushkinskii dom* (*Pushkin’s House*) and Andrei Siniavskii’s 1973 *Progulki s Pushkinom* (*Strolls with Pushkin*).<sup>91</sup> Through unequivocal treatment of Pushkin and the canon/institution he represented, both texts criticized not only the lack of freedom in Soviet everyday life but also the authoritarian system that sustained the cult of the poet. During perestroika, voices in the RSFSR denouncing Pushkin as a “monumental poet” grew louder. In the republics—especially Lithuania, Ukraine, and Moldova—the combination of Gorbachev’s reforms and grassroots national movements led to the dismantling of the institutional and intellectual foundations on which the topics “Pushkin and Chişinău” and “Pushkin in Moldova” had rested.<sup>92</sup>

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literaturnykh vzaimosviazei” [“Pushkin and Some Issues in Russian–Moldovan Interethnic Literary Relations,”] *Kodry*, no. 5 (1973): 148–150. Trubetskoi complained about the difficulty Moldovan Pushkin scholars faced in publishing in Moscow. This dissatisfaction came in the background of a large success at home as his monograph *Pushkin v Moldavii* had several editions in Chişinău and Trubetskoi continued to publish actively on the subject until the 1990s.

<sup>89</sup> Sophie Pinkham, *Pushkin for President: Russian Literary Cults in the Transition from Communism* (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2019), 67–77.

<sup>90</sup> King, *The Moldovans*, 106–112.

<sup>91</sup> On the ritual dimension of “removing Pushkin from the pedestal,” see Paul Debreczeny, *Social Functions of Literature: Alexander Pushkin and Russian Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 219.

<sup>92</sup> On dismantling of the Soviet rule in MSSR and its relation to the questions of language and culture, see Haynes, *Moldova*, 150–155.

## The Burden of Transition (1989–2025)

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 marked the end of communism in Europe, and the collapse of the USSR two years later completely transformed the economic and social landscape of the former Soviet republics.<sup>93</sup> A period of uneasy transition began, leading to, as it turned out, an uncertain future.<sup>94</sup> Moldova gained sovereignty and, soon after, long-awaited independence. These achievements were accompanied by an intensification of public debates over language, identity, and the distribution of social roles during the transition to capitalism. For the topic of Pushkin in Chișinău and Moldova, the collapse of the Soviet system and its aftermath brought radical change, creating the need to “rebuild” this field. Since 1989, one can identify three distinct periods that indicate a rather different treatment of Pushkin in independent Moldova.

The 1990s were marked by a break with Soviet tradition and a crisis in both the public perception of the poet and the funding of institutions and initiatives associated with him. Between 2001 and 2009, under the rule of the “new communists,” Pushkin was mobilized in campaigns that had promoted a multi-ethnic Moldovan identity in opposition to a Romanian one. From 2009 onward, new Russia-sponsored cultural institutions started actively using “Pushkin in Moldova” as an effort to promote the ideology of the “Russian world” and “compatriots”. Surprisingly, neither Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, nor the hybrid war in Donbas that Russia launched the same year, nor even Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the “Pushkinopad” there, fundamentally altered the continued promotion of Pushkin in Moldova’s public space. Only in 2025 did the Moldovan government begin to take steps to gradually phase out these activities, introducing new uncertainty about Pushkin’s future in the country.

Following the adoption of the language law in 1989 and the designation of Moldovan written in the Latin script as the official language, public life in Moldova shifted toward open Romanianization.<sup>95</sup> This affected toponymics, education, memory politics, and cultural policies.<sup>96</sup> Pushkin’s presence in the capital’s public space was repeatedly challenged in public debates and through painting over his monument in the central park. Both his central position in the Alley of Classics

<sup>93</sup> On how 1989 unfolded in Moldova see Sergiu Musteață, “1989 – Annus Mirabilis for the Moldavian SSR,” *Plural: History, Culture, Society* 11, no. 1 (2023): 107–126.

<sup>94</sup> On political and social transition in Moldova see Petru Negură, “The Republic of Moldova’s Transition: Between a Failed Communism and an Un-Commenced Capitalism?” *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review* 16, no. 4 (2016): 541–568.

<sup>95</sup> At the same time, Russian was granted the status of a language of interethnic communication. In 2018, this law was declared obsolete.

<sup>96</sup> See Andrei Cușco and Alexandr Voronovici, “The ‘Politics of Memory’ and ‘Historical Policy’ in Post-Soviet Moldova and Transnistria: Competing Narratives and Uses of an Uncertain Past,” in *Istoriia, Pam’iat’, Polityka. Zbirnyk Statei*, ed. Georgiy Kasianov and Oleksandra Gaidai (Kyiv: Instytut Istorii Ukrainy NAN, 2016), 155–198.



and his status as an uncontested genius were questioned. At the same time, Russia experienced its own “anti-Pushkin wave” linked to the rejection of the Soviet cult of the poet.<sup>97</sup> In Moldova, however, the rejection of Pushkin was not only part of a distancing from the Soviet past but also a phenomenon of a distinctly national character.

From a Soviet multinational poet, Pushkin was recast as a purely Russian one—a bearer of a foreign culture and a herald of imperial ambitions. In press publications, his image was deliberately diminished: he was portrayed as ungrateful, narrow-minded, cynical, mentally deficient, inadequate, a “sexual aggressor,” a reactionary nationalist, and a “troubadour of Russian chauvinism.”<sup>98</sup> The question of Pushkin’s attitude toward Bessarabian society during his exile, debated in the interwar Romanian press, gained renewed relevance. Cultural elites promoting Romanianization questioned admiring Pushkin when Moldova had its own cultural canon and heroes.

Against this background, state funding for Pushkin-related initiatives declined sharply. Budget cuts affected both the Chişinău house-museum and its branch in Dolna, leaving buildings in need of repair that the state in transition could not afford. At the same time, anti-Pushkin discourse contributed to the mobilization of the remaining Russian-speaking community, now recognized as a national minority. This group appropriated Pushkin not as a link between the former periphery and metropolis but as part of its own cultural heritage. Academic work about the poet also became more limited and localized. Since the 1990s, new (and rather small-scale) conference series entitled “Bessarabian Spring” have been held in Chişinău, focusing on Pushkin’s “southern exile”. By the time of the poet’s bicentenary in 1999—when Russia had once again “reconciled” with Pushkin—the celebrations in Moldova were more restrained, yet not entirely absent (Fig. 6) but stimulated new scholarly publications.<sup>99</sup> Meanwhile, the cult of Pushkin remained unchallenged on the left bank of the Dniester, in the de facto state of Transnistria. In Bendery, where the main clashes of the 1990–92 armed conflict took place, a bullet-scarred monument to Pushkin became a symbol of Transnistrian suffering from Moldovan aggression.<sup>100</sup>

<sup>97</sup> Debreczeny, *Social Functions of Literature*, 220.

<sup>98</sup> T. Cojocaru, “Românii în optica lui Puşkin” [“The Romanians in Pushkin’s View”], *Literatura și Arta*, I: no. 23 (2547), June 2, p. 3; II: no. 25 (2549), June 16, p. 3; III: no. 27 (2551), June 30, p. 3; IV: no. 28 (2552), July 7; V: no. 30 (2554), July 21, p. 8; VI: no. 32 (2556), August 4, p. 3; VII: no. 36 (2560), September 1, p. 8 (1994).

<sup>99</sup> For example, an expanded edition of the 1990 source-based collection was published for the anniversary: V. F. Kushnirenko, “*V strane sei otdalenoï...”: Letopis’ zhizni A. S. Pushkina v Bessarabii i sviazannykh s nim sobytii s 20 sentiabria 1820 g. po 16 iuliia 1824 g.* [“*In This Distant Land...”: A Chronicle of A. S. Pushkin’s Life in Bessarabia and Related Events, 20 September 1820–16 July 1824*], 2 vols. (Chişinău: Vector, 1999) as well as a bibliography about Pushkin in Bessarabia mentioned above.

<sup>100</sup> Anastasia Felcher, “Alexander Pushkin in Bessarabia: Literature and Identity Politics in the Periphery,” *National Identities* 21, no. 4 (2019): 12–14.

Over the next decade, Moldova was governed by representatives of the Communist Party of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM), whose identity politics—along with their approaches to history and memory—differed sharply from those of the preceding decade. The “new communists” rejected the Romanianization of the cultural sphere promoted by their political rivals in the 1990s. Instead, PCRM ideologues argued that a civic Moldovan nation and identity were better suited to Moldova’s fragmented and struggling society. Multiculturalism and concern for historical traumas of national minorities were an important part of this campaign.

The deplorable state of Pushkin-related infrastructure at the time the “new communists” came to power was exploited for propaganda purposes. In 2002, party representatives

mobilized private investors to sponsor the reconstruction of the estate in Dolna village (which regained its original name after independence). A year later, a documentary television film, *Pushkin in Moldova. The Last Duel* was released, pointing at the threats of newly adopted Romanian nationalism to the memory of the great poet.<sup>101</sup> Throughout this decade, government officials regularly attended anniversary events related to Pushkin, both in Dolna and in Chişinău.

This strategy was intended to strengthen the image of the “new communist” authorities as the “guardians” of the region’s multicultural heritage. However, after the party found itself in opposition in 2010, its representatives lost the resources needed to continue implementing this strategy. At the same time, competing discourses about Pushkin continued to surface throughout that decade. In 2009, after the death in a car accident of the poet Grigore Vieru, whom many considered Moldova’s national poet, a public debate flared up again over the option to rename Pushkin Street in the capital city. Eventually, Vieru’s name was given to a boulevard in the immediate vicinity of Pushkin Street. The latter retained its name thanks to the argument of “historicity,” as it had borne the name of the Russian poet for about 100 years by that point (with some interruption in the interwar period).

The year 2009 was significant for the topic of “Pushkin in Moldova” for one more reason. The Russian Centre for Science and Culture (RCNK), a representative office of Rossotrudnichestvo, started operating in Chişinău. This center was one of many opened by Russia abroad to promote Russian culture



**Fig. 6.** A postal stamp showing Pushkin strolling with a Moldovan writer Constantin Stamati issued by the Moldovan Postal Service on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the poet’s birth in 1999 (source: Wikimedia Commons).

<sup>101</sup> Felcher, “Alexander Pushkin in Bessarabia,” 15.



as “soft power”, especially in the countries of the so-called “near abroad.” For the few actors in Moldova who were still dealing with Pushkin, this cultural policy meant that the game had changed. The centralized efforts to promote the topic, with guidance from Moscow, meant stable external funding and renewed public prestige, albeit originating from outside Moldova. By that time, several organizations in the country were already engaged in activities related to the Russian language and culture, and all of them became engaged in promoting the “Russian world” ideology one way or another.

The Pushkin museum-house in Chişinău had already been receiving subsidies from the Russian Embassy in Moldova, which, given the modest level of Moldovan state funding, helped the museum and its employees to survive. In the context of the transition to capitalism, however, the museum lost what had perhaps been one of the most important in previous decades: its status as a cultural institution of unique significance. Small funding and a shift in the priorities of state cultural policy in independent Moldova contributed to the museum’s ongoing crisis. One manifestation of this was the contrast between the museum’s activities, focused on promoting intangible (or “spiritual”) values, and the broader commercialization of life under capitalism. Against this backdrop, renewed efforts by Russian cultural diplomacy provided an alternative for the museum’s staff. In particular, in 2012, the Chişinău museum joined the Community of Pushkin Museums, formed in Russia six years earlier to coordinate inter-museum cooperation and to promote the poet’s legacy.

In 2014, the effects of these cultural-diplomacy efforts became more apparent. Against the backdrop of the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of the hybrid war in Donbas, two Pushkin-related projects were launched in Chişinău. One was the first Pushkin Hill poetry festival (later an annual event), organized under the auspices of the house-museum and the Association of Russian Writers of Moldova, with the support of the RCNK. The second was the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the opening of the poet’s museum in Dolna, followed by renovating its exhibition. By that time, the Dolna estate had been renamed in honor of the Ralli family, and the new exhibition combined a memorial section devoted to boyar life with a literary section dedicated to Pushkin. Under the auspices of the RCNK and the Russian community in Moldova, the revived and annually held republican Pushkin celebrations in Dolna also received additional media visibility and support. The organizers emphasized continuity between the post-independence celebrations and those held in the 1970s and 1980s as a local tradition. Representatives of the Russian Embassy in Moldova and other officials made continuous appearances at these events. Whereas in the Soviet period commemorating Pushkin in MSSR had been interpreted within the framework of the “friendship of peoples,” since the 2010s, Russian cultural diplomacy has used the poet as “one of the key symbols of cultural and historical affinity of Moldova and Russia.”<sup>102</sup>

<sup>102</sup> “Respublikanskii Pushkinskii prazdnik v Moldove” [“The Republican Pushkin Festival in Moldova”], moldova.rs.gov.ru, accessed November 15, 2025, <https://moldova.rs.gov.ru/news/respublikanskij-pushkinskij-prazdnik-v-moldove/>.

In 2015, a space called the “Pushkin Auditorium” was opened in Chişinău at the RCNK. Like the revival of Pushkin’s poetry festivals, this cultural-educational project aimed to emphasize historical continuity with the city’s cultural life in earlier epochs. The original Pushkin Auditorium had existed in Chişinău for only a few decades at the beginning of the twentieth century as one of the few public venues for educational and performance events. Its founding had been timed to the poet’s anniversary in 1899, but the building itself, located on the site of one of today’s State University buildings, did not survive the wars that hit the city. The new Pushkin Auditorium was located relatively close to the original site and, since its opening, has functioned as an alternative to the poet’s house-museum, offering lectures and public programs on Pushkin. With the help of funding coming from Moscow, it also developed digital and virtual projects, including tours of Pushkin sites in Moldova and Russia. The auditorium played an active role in the 2020 celebration of the 200th anniversary of the poet’s arrival in Bessarabia, ignoring the fact that the idea of Russia’s “unity” with its neighbors was becoming increasingly militarized. At the same time, the Pushkin topic was in parallel commercialized through the opening of a themed restaurant by private entrepreneurs, which operated for several years in the late 2010s and early 2020s (Figs. 7a and 7b).



**Fig. 7a.** Emblem of the restaurant *Pushkin 1820*, which operated in the center of Chişinău (near Pushkin Street) in the 2020s (source/photographer: Anastasia Felcher, photo from 2019).



**Fig. 7b.** Thematic interior design of the same restaurant (source/photographer: Anastasia Felcher, photo from 2019).

Against the backdrop of a sharp reduction in local resources for academic research on Pushkin in Chişinău and Moldova, today the topic remains of interest to a narrow circle of specialists. At the same time, the new actors in the sphere of public history and culture funded from Russia, and their politically motivated



engagement with Pushkin, made the public dimension increasingly set the tone of discussion about the poet in Moldova. Given the Russian state sponsorship of the “Russian House in Chişinău” (the name adopted since 2021 for the RCNK and other Rossotrudnichestvo offices), the topic remains closely linked to Russian public diplomacy efforts.

In 2025, it became known that the Moldovan government had denounced the agreement on cultural centers under which the “Russian House” operated in the capital, allowing the institution to function only until 2026. The official justification is the suspicion that the activities of the “Russian House” undermine Moldova’s sovereignty. It has not been specified whether programs related to Pushkin fall under this decision. However, in the context of the ongoing war in neighboring Ukraine, now in its fourth year, one can assume that the further political uses of Pushkin as a cultural symbol may increasingly slide toward militarization in Moldova as well.

### Conclusions

One of the key features of “Pushkin in Moldova” as a phenomenon beyond niche studies is the inseparability of its academic and intellectual comprehension from the public sphere. Although the political use of the poet’s stay “in the south” has dominated Moldova’s public and educational space since 1944—especially following the opening of the Pushkin museumhouse—it is the intersection of political, intellectual, and public dimensions that provides a full picture of Pushkin in Moldova. Despite the challenges of the past thirty-five years, Pushkin’s legacy remains a relevant subject today, albeit primarily for a relatively narrow, largely Russian-speaking audience in Moldova, in Chişinău, and abroad.

Recently, the discussion around “Pushkin in Moldova” has been developing against the backdrop of Russia’s increasingly aggressive foreign policy, the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine in February 2022, and the growing politicization of the issue of “compatriots” abroad. This made it more difficult for local actors engaged with the subject to integrate it into an agenda that would resonate with the country’s residents beyond the usual suspects. In this context, emphasizing the more than two-hundred-year-old local tradition of studying and interpreting the Russian poet as part of the region’s multicultural heritage could, in theory, redirect the discussion toward a more inclusive framework. However, current foreign-policy dynamics and the domestic agenda in Moldova do not suggest such a development.

### Rezumat

Acest articol examinează peste două secole de reprezentări academice, publice și politice ale unui episod scurt, dar semnificativ, din istoria Basarabiei (astăzi Republica Moldova): cei trei ani de la începutul secolului al XIX-lea asociați cu șederea lui Aleksandr Pușkin în regiune. Exilat din capitala impe-

rială într-un teritoriu anexat de Imperiul Rus cu doar opt ani mai devreme, tânărul poet a produs în această perioadă un corpus important de opere. Pe măsură ce regimurile politice în regiunea s-au schimbat, studiul lui Pușkin și interpretările exilului său au căpătat semnificații politice variate, de la uitate la admirație sau condamnare vehementă. Articolul urmărește tradiția intelectuală locală de studiere a lui Pușkin și analizează imaginile publice ale poetului, precum și instrumentalizarea lor politică. Articolul argumentează că, deși fiecare dintre aceste sfere a contribuit independent la dezvoltarea temei, numai coroborarea lor permite înțelegerea deplină a complexității „fenomenului Pușkin” în Moldova.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** Aleksandr Pușkin; literatură și politică; diplomație culturală; Moldova; Chișinău.

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