

Decommunizing the National Poet: Post-1989 Reading of Eminescu, Botev, and Petőfi

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This article attempts to explain why de-mythicizing—and not mythicizing—the institution of the “national poet” illustrates more closely and more deeply the ideological, cultural and identity-related changes in post-communist East-Central Europe. As for the case studies, I have chosen the critical reception of Mihai Eminescu, Hristo Botev, and Sándor Petőfi, precisely because the aforementioned phenomenon is more frequent in countries such as Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary, whose self-portrayals in terms of identity are profoundly indebted to the East-West binary opposition. In order to demonstrate that de-mythicizing the national poet occurs predominantly after 1989, I analyze a series of critical and imagistic reconsiderations of Eminescu, Botev, and Petőfi, brought about by the fact that anti-communist, pro-Western intellectual elites regarded the cult of the national poet as a symptom of cultural and ideological backwardness, typical for the ‘uncivilized’ East, scarred as it was by the trauma of national communism. Thus, it has become evident that breaking away from the Eminescu/Botev/Petőfi national myth is part of a larger decommunizing tendency, tributary to the capitalist transition.

Keywords: literature and ideology / East-Central European literatures / postcommunism / national poets / demythicizing / Eminescu, Mihai / Botev, Hristo / Petőfi Sándor

In post-communism, the most heated ideological, social, and cultural debate in Central and Eastern Europe revolved around nationalism.¹ Much to the surprise of the Western intellectual elites, who considered that socialist ideology and nationalism are incompatible, if not downright antagonistic, the researchers that specialized in the study of East-

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Central cultural space regard nationalism as an aspect of the “perilous legacy” of communism (Mevius, *The Communist*).²

Apart from the realization that, “far from ruthlessly suppressing nationhood, the Soviet regime pervasively institutionalized it,” which, in turn, brought about a “political field supremely conducive to nationalism” (Brubaker 17), and putting forward different types of “national communism/socialism/Stalinism” (Sugar; Verdery, *National*), there is also scientific consensus regarding the fact that the nationalistic excesses of Nicolae Ceaușescu in Romania, Todor Zhivkov in Bulgaria, and Slobodan Milošević in Former Yugoslavia remain extreme cases, yet not anomalies for the Eastern European communism of the 1970s and 1980s. Precisely that is the reason why post-communist nationalism was conceptually separated from the whole process of capitalist transition, being mainly labeled as “a political and ideological phenomenon ... rooted in and marked by Leninist-authoritarian mentalities and habits, directed against any principle of difference and primarily against those groups and forces that champion pro-Western, pluralist orientations” (Tismăneanu 7). To draw a rather cynical symbolic parallel, “[t]he Wars of Yugoslav Succession, when nationalism—in opposition to liberalism—is in play, hold a critical function in transition culture: the unspoken, but deadly alternative to markets and pluralism” (Kennedy 240). Despite the fact that numerous studies illustrate that Eastern post-communist nationalism is deeply indebted to the disappointments and frustrations brought about by transitional economic, social and cultural changes (Todorova 98; Verdery, “Nationalism”), anti-communist intellectual elites cultivate an exclusively “progressive” image of post-communism (Lánczi 69–71), one of the major challenges of overcoming totalitarianism being precisely that of eliminating the issue of nationalism from the inner workings of new, free, and democratic societies.

This point of view—as anti-communist as it is anti-nationalist—powers one of the most prominent cultural debates of post-communism, namely the reorganization of the literary canon, whose main

² I will be employing the term “communism” instead of “socialism” in discussing the political regime that reigned in Central and Eastern Europe starting with the end of the Second World War and up until 1989. Even if the term was initially met with resistance in the academic debates of the 1990s on the grounds that ex-Soviet republics regarded themselves as “socialists on the path to communism,” the term has gained strength during the 2000s, also on the ground of the many resolutions/reports/laws that condemned the crimes of “totalitarian communist regimes”: Council of Europe – 2006, Romania – 2006, Hungary – 2010, Bulgaria – 2016, etc.

focus is the critical reassessment of the national poet. Due to the fact that, in many East-Central European countries, the cult of the national poet reaches similar, if not greater heights during communism than during the second half of the nineteenth century (when – in the most European countries—can be identified the peak of cultic commemoration/veneration), this reassessment is often tantamount to a de-mythification. The two contradictory phenomena—the communist mythicization and the post-communist de-mythification of the national poet—are characteristic of countries such as Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania, whose national identities are built upon unsettledness and their peripheral and hybrid character, constantly vacillating between East and West. The old Romanian inferiority complex regarding its position between the Occident and the Orient, best described through the metaphor of “a Latin island in a Slavic sea” (Djuvara; Martin) finds a counterpart in the hesitation Bulgarians experience when faced with a choice between Balkanism and Occidentalism (Otfinoski; Hupchick) and the Hungarian back-and-forth motion between East and Mitteleuropa (Katzenstein; Kehoe).

Moreover, the particularities of the communist consecration of the national poets Hristo Botev (1848–1876), Sándor Petőfi (1823–1849), and Mihai Eminescu (1850–1889), as well as their post-communist de-mythification process represent necessary additions to the substantial study authored by Marijan Dović and Jón Karl Helgason, *National Poets, Cultural Saints. Canonization and Commemorative Cults of Writers in Europe*. Despite its uncontested merits, this volume—and the sections devoted to re-reading the myth of the national poet from other major research projects such as the one edited by Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer, *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, or Andrew Baruch Wachtel’s *Remaining Relevant after Communism. The Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe*—pay little to no attention to the phenomenon of post-communist de-mythification.

On the one hand, the critical reception of Eminescu, Botev, and Petőfi confirms that the national poets “assumed an unprecedented level of social relevance ... during the commemorative century (from late 1830s to the Second World War): the leap from individual to mass veneration, the crescendo-like ritualization, and the growing connection with national movements” (Dović 62). Whether they were (Botev and Petőfi) or not (Eminescu) bards/martyr poets of their nation and regardless of the inherent geopolitical, cultural, and identity differences between Romania, Hungary and Bulgaria, the mythicization of the

three writers witnessed at the end of the nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth century roughly follows the same pattern.

Owing to the popularity of his manuscripts (amassing nearly 14.000 pages) made available several years after his death, Eminescu is rapidly turned into a symbol of Romanian spirit: “[I]n a number of years, Eminescu transforms ... from a rather weak symbol of nationalism, to the great prophet of Romanian nationalism” (Boia 49). His conservative and nationalist views, mainly expressed through his journalistic texts, will be ideologically manipulated by the promoters of anti-Western traditionalism, the socialists, and the extreme-nationalist members of the Legionary Movement (paramilitary organization of fascist descent), the poet being considered “the integral expression of the Romanian soul” (Iorga 167). Eminescu comes to rank among great national prophets and martyrs, alongside Zalmoxis, the presumed supreme god of the Geto-Dacians, the forefathers of the Romanian people; Ștefan cel Mare [Stephen The Great], Moldova’s ruler for nearly half a century and a fervent defender of Christianity; Horea, the Transylvanian leader of the peasant uprising against the Hungarian nobility; and, unsurprisingly, “The (legionary) Captain” Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, the Iron Guard’s leader. The myth is confirmed by the most renowned Romanian interwar critic and literary historian, George Călinescu, who, in his *History* (371–402), entitles “The National Poet” the chapter dedicated to Eminescu.

Botev himself (who dies in 1876, following his allegedly leading a military campaign meant to revive the revolutionary spirit and the dream of national emancipation after five centuries of Ottoman occupation) is mythicized both by socialist movements, being perceived—especially thanks to the influential critic and literary historian Todor Pavlov—as an “immortal Son, teacher and leader of the people,” “the embodiment of the profound essence and unconscious compulsions that define the revolutionary spirit of Bulgaria and of the entire human-kind” (Kiossev, “Heritage” 136), and the fascist regime installed after the 1934 *coup d’état*: the city of Orhanía is then renamed Botevgrad, Ivan Mešekov publishes *Hristo Botev—poet and genius* in 1936, and in 1939, at the presumed site of his death, Okolchitsa, a monument is erected in his honor, which bears an immense orthodox cross at its top, portraying the poet “as a prophet or the archangel Michael, and also as Moses and Christ” (Penčev 125).

The hyperbolized figure of Petőfi (who died in 1849 on the anti-Russian battlefield in Transylvania where he fought for Hungary’s independence) becomes visible especially after 1920, as the Treaty of

Trianon forces Hungary to cede other countries 70% of its territory and 60% of its population, while the texts of the national poet become a banner for all interwar revisionist movements. The very influential study authored by János Horváth, *Petőfi Sándor* (1922), where Petőfi and his contemporary János Arany are declared “the towering national classics of Hungarian literature,” places the poet above the confines of the Romantic period, conceptualizing a so-called “folk-style lyrical realism,” which amasses the spirit and aspirations of an entire people irrespective of any historical context (Neubauer 54). He is featured on national banknotes and a monument in his memory is erected in Budapest. His bust was to become the central symbol of Greater Hungary, the extended national territory obtained after the First and Second Vienna Diktats (Frank 208–209).

The communist “saints”

On the other hand, the coming of Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary under Soviet influence did nothing to alleviate the process of mythicization. Quite the contrary.

In 1948, Eminescu receives posthumous membership to the Academy of the Socialist Republic of Romania, and the 100th anniversary of his birth (in 1950) paints the image of a poet who fell victim to “the bourgeois-landowning exploitation” and who wholeheartedly supported the proletarian cause. During the entire Stalinist regime (1948–1965) established by Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, his most promoted text was the abridged version of the 1874 poem “Împărat și proletar” [“Emperor and Proletarian”], containing the renowned “revolutionary” verses “Destroy the hateful system, the ruthless, the unfair, / Which splits the world asunder—poor these and rich the others” (Eminescu 131). After the gradually more explicit independence from Moscow (1964) and especially starting with 1971, when Nicolae Ceaușescu outlined the beginning of his infamous “cultural revolution,” which was to serve as basis for the nationalist-communist regime, Eminescu is again “rewritten,” becoming yet again a symbol of the Romanian spirit and the nation’s exceptionality. His patriotic 1883 poem “Doina,” which describes Romania under foreign rule and exploitation, is recited at official gatherings, public manifestations and in schools. The national poet is also employed as a major argument by the protochronist doctrine, which questionably attributes cultural and scientific innovations to the Romanians, with Eminescu allegedly

anticipating not only existentialism and modernist poetry, but also different findings in the field of sociology and physics (Papu). In 1989, a century after his death, Eminescu, “the universal man of Romanian letters” (Noica), comes to serve as symbolic tool for strengthening the myth of the “beloved leader” Ceaușescu, whose nationalist project the poet had presumably shared.

After the Second World War, the cult of the national poet grew in size in Bulgaria as well, irrespective of whether the communist dictatorship was of a Stalinist or a “humanist-socialist” origin, as Todor Jivkov’s regime, installed in 1956, had proclaimed itself to be. The highest peak in the Balkan Mountains is eponymous with Botev as are several football clubs, thousands of schools, streets, prizes, and cultural institutions. In 1948, the 100th anniversary of his birth gives way to a wave of festive events: “The authorities established Botev monuments in Sofia, Vrača and Kalofer, and commissioned a bibliography and biography. Schools and cultural clubs dedicated special weeks to Botev’s life-work, and some important social institutions were renamed ‘Hristo Botev’” (Sygkelos 218). The majority of his poems (“Hadzhi Dimitar,” “My Prayer,” “The Hanging of Vasil Levski,” “To My Brother,” “To My Mother,” “On Parting,” “In the Tavern”) go on to become popular folk songs among Bulgarians. Read through the lens of socialist realism and then nationalist communism, the poems and journalistic works authored by Botev, “the universal bard of freedom,” express not only the need for sacrifices in order to obtain national emancipation from the Ottoman occupation, but also the imperious urgency to wipe out fascism, colonialism, and capitalist exploiters: “His burning patriotism arose from a sense of international brotherhood. His love for his people led him to love all the oppressed, without distinction as to race or nationality” (Topencharov 57). The myth of the national poet was even employed to legitimize the regime’s most heinous crimes. Botev’s martyrdom would also be invoked during the so-called Bulgarisation of Turkish citizens, actually nothing less than ethnic cleansings coordinated by Jivkov in the 1980s (Penčev 127).

The national poet was also deployed to legitimize the Hungarian Stalinist regime of Mátyás Rákosi (1945–1956). During the last days of World War II, Petőfi’s name is used in anti-Nazi propaganda, in reference to his fight for liberty and independence more than a century prior. In a first phase, “the Propaganda Department gave instructions to use quotes from Petőfi, such as ‘Destroy the scoundrels at home!’ and ‘On your feet, Hungarians, the Fatherland calls!’,” and then the symbol of freedom gradually gave way to the symbol of the nation;

the poet's portrait was displayed alongside those of Lenin and Stalin, in order to emphasize the fact that the new regime respects and values the national identity (Mevius, *Agents* 87–110). Central squares, statues, streets bearing Petőfi's name are to be found all across the country. Even the longest bridge over the Danube, linking Buda and Pesta, is named after the national poet in 1945. *Petőfi, our Banner* (the title of Horváth Márton's 1950 volume) becomes a common slogan during the public manifestations organized by the Hungarian communist party: "Following the Soviet cultural commissar Anatoly Lunacharsky's claim that Petőfi was 'the Bolshevik of his age,'" the communist cultural policy presented Petőfi's "democratic internationalism" as harmonious with his commitment to a "national revolution" (Hites 43). Following the same logic of manipulation, it hardly comes as a surprise that the poet's nationalist, anti-imperialist, and republican spirit tutored the anti-Stalinist Revolution of October 1956, which started off as a peaceful manifestation conducted by members of The Petőfi Circle and which originated in front of Petőfi's statue. One of the major points agreed upon by the revolutionaries, prior to the insurgency being brutally muffled down by the Red Army, was the revival of the old National Peasant Party as "The Petőfi Party" (Cornis-Pope, "Revolt" 87). The so-called "Goulash Communism" that managed to gradually set in during János Kádár's regime (1956–1988) unsurprisingly exploited Petőfi's mythical figure to its fullest extent. Even if the consequences of the Treaty of Trianon have become a sensitive topic in the meanwhile, the poet's revolutionary and anti-imperialist spirit was continually reiterated. Four monographies paying explicit homage to the poet, as well as three literary historical overviews dedicated to the cultural period in which he lived and created are published during the 1960s, further underlining that he has become the symbol of two revolutions: the one in 1848 and that of 1956, respectively. His name features on even more streets, schools, prizes, organizations, and cultural institutions, and the erection of new statues in his honor becomes a common occurrence (Frank 210–217).

Concluding, the cult of "the beloved leader" (Ceaușescu, Jivkov, Kádár) and national communism as forms of independence from both soviet imperialism and Western, capitalist imperialism go hand in hand with the mythicization of the national poet in all three of the aforementioned cultural spaces.

The anti-communist de-mythicization

This state of fact is representative not only for the construction of national identity for the three countries, which for over half a century had been under communist control, but it also explains why the post-communist decommunizing process regarded anti-communism, anti-nationalism, democracy, and westernization as conceptually equivalent. Moreover, it explains why the national poet was the object of this de-mythicization³ more intensely and more systematically than in any other historical period.⁴ For the anti-communist, pro-Western intellectual elites, the “cultural saint” corrupted by national-communist propaganda must be condemned as a symbol of backwardness, provincial inferiority complexes and rudimentary Eastern self-isolation against the Western civilization. All the other possible functions of the national poet—for example, what Marko Juvan calls “sainting” as “worlding” or “cosmopolitanism” (14), or what Andrei Terian perceives as integration into the “intercultural and intertextual network” of world literature (“Mihai Eminescu” 36) or what Dimitar Kambourov identifies as its “healing effect by curbing both the populist and individualist extremes of the collective unconscious” (53)—are not even vaguely outlined, the foremost urgency being his de-mythicization, labeled as an immediate liberation from every form of ideological and political (especially communist) manipulations.

³ The mythicizing efforts (even in aberrant forms; Terian, “Prophet” 307–325) unsurprisingly continued after 1989: national poets were employed as legitimizing symbols by various nationalist political factions, their birthday as well as the day they died were turned into various national festivities, the most important cultural institutions bear their names, new statues were erected in their honor. Nevertheless, unlike all other historical periods, post-communism did not develop new mechanisms of reproducing their canonical status.

⁴ Previously, the most virulent critiques of Eminescu, Petőfi or Botev were the result of circumstantial cultural or geopolitical feuds, which had never once succeeded in generating an authentic following and, in turn, a process of de-mythicization: e.g., in 1980s, Moses Rosen, Chief Rabbi of the Romanian Jewish Community, sparks a public outcry as he protests against the fact that antisemitic political articles authored by Eminescu were to be featured in his *Collected Works*; in his 1977 study, *The Image of Germans in Hungarian Literature*, Johan Weidlein calls Petőfi “an apostle of hate” and “one of the most dangerous agitators in history ... for the seed he sowed in a people so easily instigated reaped bad and ultimately horrible things” (92); in Bulgaria, the fact that Botev wrote little over twenty poems prompted debates surrounding the legitimacy of his canonical status as national poet and to his replacement, in several books on Bulgarian literary history, by Ivan Vazov (1850–1921), a prolific poet, novelist, and playwright, “the Patriarch of Bulgarian literature,” “the most translated Bulgarian writer of all time.”

Virgil Nemoianu's 1990 contribution to this topic is crucial and holds true not only for Romanian culture. The Romanian-born American professor, author of one of the most seminal studies on Romanticism (*The Taming of Romanticism*, "National Poets' in the Romantic Age: Emergence and Importance"), most clearly states that the detachment from the myth of the national poet and democratization/European integration are virtually equivalent:

No, in Romania, where this is still not possible, but among Romanian intellectuals living in the West, I often notice a joyful tendency: a self-critical inquiry of Romanian thought and literature of the last century, and especially a certain detachment from Eminescu and his legacy of ideas. ... The chance at drifting away from the West ... was more and more vigorously proclaimed by autochthonous successors of Eminescu's myth. Anti-historicism, passivity and sleep-like withdrawal found among them virulent defendants. ... Proof that it was not merely an incidental aberration is the fact that during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, precisely this post-Eminescu literary production creates for itself a grinning mask of crass simplicity, a rude and repressive ideology that seeks to validate the Orwellian totalitarianism of one of the most pitiful dictators in Romanian history [Nicolae Ceaușescu]. (Nemoianu, "Despărțirea" 8)

A similar point of view lies at the foundation of another contribution, that of I. Negoïtescu, the most influential postwar interpreter of Eminescu, a political prisoner during the 1960s, and exiled intellectual during the 1980s. Dissatisfied with the fact that the 1991 anti-government protests employed images of Eminescu as a legitimizing symbol, Negoïtescu pleads for clear distinction between the "great poet" and the "absolutely infamous politician," whose positions anticipated extremist movements and who was nothing short of a major obstacle in the "civilizing process" of the Romanian people (Negoïtescu 12). But perhaps the harshest critique of the myth of the national poet (also due to the scandalizing effect it had in the public sphere; Terian, "(Re) politicizing" 11) was published in 1998 in the explicitly anti-communist journal *Dilema*. The reasons for relegating Eminescu ranged from the need for deconstructing the interpretative clichés surrounding his works and amending the ideological manipulations brought to his image, through addressing the general oversaturation with his works triggered by its vulgarization, to the kitsch surrounding the public homage he was constantly brought. This issue, edited by the young novelist Cezar-Paul Bădescu, would later become a book entitled *The Eminescu Case* including critical responses in regard to "the monstrous personality cult" to which Eminescu was subjected (9). If the more mature generation of contributors to this volume plead for the "cour-

age to break away from Eminescu if we wish to find him anew, bring him closer and turn him into a contemporary” (12–13) or for “a plural, contradictory, fascinating and ‘lively’ Eminescu,” simultaneously “democratic” and “postmodern,” “the exact opposite of the mummified, ancient image of the ‘national poet’,” typical of communist times (16), the considerations of the younger writers and intellectuals are intently outrageous. Eminescu’s works are labeled as “nearly illegible,” “confusing,” and “crabbed” (19), his political views are regarded as “null,” typical of pre-modern times (43), while the concept of “national poet” itself is seen as a phenomenon proper to “nations and cultures of minor status,” which have not yet embarked on the journey to democracy (27). Even the efforts aimed at de-mythicizing Eminescu on scientific grounds, both through methodology (Bot) and rhetoric (Boia), appear to have not taken into account the “transnational dimension” of the national poet’s canonization (Mironescu 75). The cliché regarding Eminescu’s uniqueness and exceptionality is further perpetuated by the idea that the inability of the Romanian culture to let go of the cult of the national poet would make it inferior to other European cultures.

The extent of the efforts directed toward de-mythicizing Eminescu are also confirmed by the confusion felt among the anti-communist ideologues. Significant for this matter is a 2002 article of ultraconservative intellectual Horia-Roman Patapievi, one of the most vocal condemners of the crimes of the communist regime and who, at that time, had risen to a management position in the National Council for the Study of the *Securitate* Archives. Going against the de-mythicizing project undertaken by “Dilema” (with which he was very close)—albeit without admitting to it—Patapievi’s rhetoric betrays a tendency symptomatic for post-1989 Romanian culture:

As a national poet, Eminescu cannot survive, because we are now exiting the era of *the national*. Eminescu can no longer be a canonical poet, because the sociological revolution that took place in higher education brought to power “intellectuals” that seem downright allergic to the word “canon” and who reach for their revolver as soon as they hear the word “tradition.” Neither can he be considered profound, because depth, not being seen as a postmodern trait, is no longer appreciated by progressive intellectuals. ... For the imperious need for renewal felt among young intellectuals that seek to become internationally visible, Eminescu plays the role of a corpse well hidden in the closet of Romanian culture. (58)

For Patapievici, “the former national poet of classicist Romania” had become the topic of de-mythicizations because—from the standpoint of “neo-communist” postmodernists—he was “politically incorrect.” Nonetheless, none of the Romanian detractors of the Eminescu myth display any signs of a “left-wing” ideological stance. Quite the contrary, many of them are vocal promoters of liberalism, according to which any socialist idea implies a revival of the communist regime. As previously mentioned, in Romania during the 1990s, the cult for the national poet is associated with totalitarianism, whereas de-mythicization is equivalent to Europeanization and cultural emancipation.

The mythological “inheritance” of communism visibly influenced the critical reception of Hungary’s national poet as well: “After 1989, Petőfi’s icon lost much of its luster among the literati and the intellectuals, precisely because communists, nationalists, populists, and promoters of other ‘isms’ had glorified his somewhat naïve rhetoric of political, national, and global freedom,” notes John Neubauer, while taking into account the blatant xenophobia found in some of the poems and articles authored by Petőfi around mid-nineteenth century: in one instance he curses the “whore mothers” of the “Swabian Germans living in Hungary,” in another, he cries out that a “Serbian plague” “was gnawing at the country’s leg” while other texts find him lamenting the ungrateful Serbs, Croats, Germans, Slovaks, and Romanians, which he accuses of “biting” “the Magyar who defended them from the Turks and the Tatars” (Neubauer 43–48). With the rise of liberal anti-communism, “the youthfully rebellious tribune and democrat Sándor Petőfi was not expected to become a protagonist” (Halász), an idea further emphasized by the reputed professor of Hungarian origins from Indiana University, Mihály Szegedy-Maszák, which also noted the consequences the exaggeration of Petőfi’s image during communism has had on contemporary readerships:

At a conference celebrating the 175th anniversary of the birth of Petőfi, held at the beginning of April 1998, several participants spoke of a general lack of interest in the works of this nineteenth century author ... Some poems by Petőfi, [Endre] Ady, and even [Atilla] József seem unreadable today. Teachers do not know how to handle them, and they are usually avoided by the authors of dissertations. By contrast, the young critics of the 1990s are avid readers of works by the authors who were dismissed by the Marxists in the late 1940s. (206)

A crucial role in interrupting the process of Petőfi’s mythicization was also played by the scandal that erupted in 1989 and continued

throughout the 1990s because of the presumed discovery of the poet's skeleton in Barguzin, a village in Siberia. As István Rév informs in detail in his study *Parallel autopsies*, the legend of the poet's death not in 1849 on the anti-Russian battlefield in Transylvania, but in a forced labor camp in Siberia was also invoked during the Second World War as means of propaganda, but as European communist dictatorships fell apart, turning the national poet into an "archetype of the Hungarian Gulag victim" (35) met anti-communist expectations perfectly. The archeological expeditions turned out to be a fiasco, because the analysis of the "repatriated" skeleton undoubtedly showed that, "instead of being the remains of a young but mature Christian male, [it] belonged to a sexually immature, Orthodox Jewish female, the perfect antithesis of a real hero" (37). The research team was accused of fostering "communist" and "anti-national" feelings, and conspiracy theories and extreme-nationalist speculations were developed around the topic until well into the late 2000s. However, the Hungarian scientific community regards this incident as proof for the fanatical dimensions taken by the mythologic-ideological manipulations of Petőfi's image. The most vividly "post-ideological" phase of Petőfi's reception reached its climax after 1989, especially against interpretations put forward by the reputed critic and literary historian István Margócsy (who, in 1999, published a very "perceptive" study of Petőfi's poetry; Neubauer 42). He is regarded less and less as a "saint," "an idol," "a martyr," and "a revolutionary" and more as a reflexive poet of nature, whose "poetic subjectivism is in conflict with the universal character of the prophetic poet" (Komáromy 35).

However, the promise of de-ideologizing the national poet in post-communism has not of late been delivered in Hungary either. Decommunizing Petőfi brings forth a new façade, one that aligns itself to anti-communist liberal ideology:

1990s brought about a critical surge preoccupied with debunking his cult by laying bare the figurative and material devices deployed in the various phases of its development along with the various ideological intentions these phases came to serve. However, while taking on a supposedly more historical and ideology-free stance, striving to find ways to make Petőfi's poetry relevant regardless of, and despite, political misappropriations, these approaches were fueled by a very similar dynamic. When, for instance, they emphasized Petőfi's embeddedness in the cultural markets of his era and his successful commercialization of poetry, their angle was, once again, clearly determined by a post-socialist political and economic climate and the new values it foregrounded. (Hites 43–44)

However multifaceted, the de-mythicizing discourse surrounding Hristo Botev also seeks to adapt the national poet to the post-communist political and cultural climate. An excellent contribution to the matter is Boyko Penčev's *Hristo Botev and the Necessity of National Icons*. A first national debate was launched in 1991 by Ilia Todorov, when he dully demonstrated that Botev did not in fact write the famous "proto-communist" manifesto (discovered and published in 1934) containing the credo that was to become the legitimizing slogan of Bulgarian socialism for over half a century: "I believe in a bright and universal communism!" (121–125). Moreover, his poetry and journalistic work are shown to possess traits that come at loggerhead with values of the democratic society post-communist Bulgaria sought to become. Sometimes, Botev is seen as a major source of xenophobic and anti-democratic rhetoric, as he perpetuates the false equivalence between *ottoman* and *Turk*, which in its turn aggravates the existing tensions between Bulgaria and its southern neighbors (127). In other instances—as in Milena Kirova's 1995 *The Narcissistic Botev: Mythology of a (Re)Birth*, and Inna Peleva's 1998 *Botev. The Body of Nationalism*—the poet is subjected to a "radical deconstructivist reading" with a view to demonstrating that his writings were often misread in an attempt to turn him into an instrument for idealized (national) narcissistic self-reflection. Although Bulgarian conservative intellectuals labeled such psychoanalytical interpretations as "encroachment[s] on Botev" (Penčev 124), as they would presumably exaggerate the importance of otherwise irrelevant biographical details or nuances in his works, a re-evaluation such as Peleva's is regarded as fully capable to

fully reconstruct those aspects of Botev's work that have been left out of the "high" literary and historiographic readings of the texts of the "national idol." Her aim is to identify in these texts not only the long-acknowledged appeals to freedom, fraternity, and equality, legitimizing precisely the type of eschatology of the Bulgarian national revolution that seems acceptable from the point of view of European culture, but also—and most importantly—to identify the "dark discursive doubles" of those glorious appeals and to reconstruct the "ardent primitiveness of the savage thought" in the national revolt, which has been omnipresent in Botev's works but has been systematically left out by the interpretive canon. (Elenkov 456–457).

After 1989, Botev, formerly a symbol of patriotism and national pride, would become a figure that is "depressingly pessimistic and deprived of dutiful revolutionary optimism," the helpless reflection of an "intolerable situation: the Bulgarians have proven to be the most backward,

the most oriental among the Balkan nations yet they were unable to recognize this condition as unbearable” (Kambourov 66).

The rupture between the fanatically patriotic representations of the national poet and the expectations and needs of post-communist societies is also reflected in the popular short film written and directed by Deyan Bararev in 2012, irreverently titled “Botev Is an Idiot.” The film brings together the classical figure of the nineteenth-century revolutionary and artist—keen not only to pay homage to his country through his writings, but also to sacrifice his life for it (as Botev was habitually portrayed by the school curriculum, deeply indebted to communist practices)—and the twenty-first-century rebel (the typical nonconformist Western teenager), who perceives the national poet as a sterile idealist, an abstract idol used to legitimize a false social system, prohibitive in regard to values such as basic human companionship, fairness, and meritocracy. In a world shaped by effortless or illicit success, Botev can be nothing but a “fool.” Portrayed similarly to a Dostoevskyan “idiot,” Botev seems to be re-mythicized by Bararev’s film, winner of several predominantly Eastern-European film awards. In fact, the film does not present Botev’s model of reception as a solution for transcending the post-communist crisis. The process of his “decommunizing” both parodies the inertial perpetuation of the old regime and simultaneously confirms the near impossibility of his assimilation by the younger generations.

Conclusions

In Romania, where 1989 was marked by the bloodiest divorce from the communist regime in Central and Eastern Europe and “anti-communism became synonymous with democratization” (Petrescu 45), the disappearance of the Eminescu myth led to the near pro-European statement of the 1990s: an escape from cultural “backwardness” and presumed “minority” status, and an exercise in civility on the part of the liberal intelligentsia. In Hungary, where the communist system was the most liberal between 1960 and 1980, and where the break from this regime did not encounter notable difficulties, Petőfi appears as a figure of capitalist transition only to the nationalist fanatics who attempt to turn him into a proto-martyr of the Gulag relentlessly searching for his remains in Siberia. The ideological excesses of the national poet are left behind in the nineteenth century, as Hungarian cultural institutions try to limit Petőfi’s image to the field of aesthet-

ics and cultural production. In Bulgaria, where many suspect that the communist regime continues to live on under the guise of democracy, Botev's deconstruction aims to serve as clear reflection of the country's cultural inferiority complexes. The post-communist freedom and democracy would therefore imply a departure from the "rudimentary" cult of the national poet.

By analyzing these cultural phenomena, so similar in their manifestations, it is evident that the imperative of "civilizing" the post-communist East finds a particular expression in the efforts of decommunizing Botev, Eminescu, and Petőfi. Nonetheless, the post-1989 de-mythicizations of the three poets are manifestations of what Bulgarian theorist Alexander Kiossev calls "self-colonization," as all these efforts are validated through and testify to a "culture of backwardness" obsessed with "filling in" or "catching up" with the West, a "never-ending pursuit of recognition by the center." If previous attempts at deconstructing the three national poets are now regarded as incidental and originating from outside the national culture, this time the nation itself—through its most prominent intellectuals—is the de-mythicizing agent. The European integration takes place in the absence of myths forged in the past—especially if they were amplified during communism—and by assimilating the mythology of the new, liberal world order. Thus Botev, Eminescu, and Petőfi reemerge as ideologized as ever, yet with the claim of having been fully de-ideologized—a paradox that not only describes the post-communist status of the national poet, but also perfectly illustrates how anti-communism/the culture of post-1989 transition helped shape the identity of East-Central Europe.

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Dekomunizacija nacionalnega pesnika: branje Eminescuja, Boteva in Petőfija po letu 1989

Ključne besede: literatura in ideologija / vzhodnosrednjeevropske književnosti / postkomunizem / nacionalni pesniki / demitizacija / Eminescu, Mihai / Botev, Hristo / Petőfi Sándor

Razprava poskuša pojasniti, zakaj demitiziranje – in ne mitiziranje – institucije »nacionalnega pesnika« natančneje in globlje ponazarja ideološke, kulturne in identitetne spremembe v postkomunistični vzhodni in srednji Evropi. Kot študije primerov v razpravi obravnavam kritično recepcijo treh nacionalnih pesnikov – Mihaija Eminescuja, Hrista Boteva in Sándorja Petőfija –, in sicer zato, ker je omenjeni pojav očitnejši v državah, kot so Romunija, Bolgarija in Madžarska, torej državah, ki svojo lastno identiteto razumejo predvsem skozi binarno opozicijo vzhod-zahod. Pokazati želim, da se demitiziranje nacionalnega pesnika dogaja zlasti po letu 1989, in v ta namen analiziram vrsto kritičnih in imagističnih obravnav Eminescuja, Boteva in Petőfija, ki jih je povzročilo dejstvo, da so antikomunistične, prozahodne intelektualne elite

obravnavale kult nacionalnega pesnika kot simptom kulturne in ideološke zaostalosti, značilne za »necivilizirani«¹ vzhod, ki ga je prizadela travma nacionalnega komunizma. Tako se na koncu izkaže, da je opuščanje nacionalnega mita Eminescu/Botev/Petőfi del širše tendence po »dekomunizaciji«, ki jo je s seboj prinesla kapitalistična tranzicija.

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