



Delo No

INTRODUCTION TO “STENOGRAM OF THE GENERAL MEETING OF THE ARTISTS OF THE UNION OF SOVIET ARTISTS OF MOLDAVIA (15 MAY, 1951)”

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The original version of the document presented below is found in the Archives of Social and Political Organizations of the Republic of Moldova (the former archives of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Moldavia).¹ This archive, located in the governmental central district of Chișinău, stores historical records of local social and political organizations. A considerable number of these documents are mounted in yellowed cardboard folders, many still bearing on their covers the cursive words *Delo No* (in Russian, literally: “Case Nr.”). All are records, transcripts, and other bureaucratic remnants of former Soviet trade and creative unions, of the Communist Party and Youth League (*Komsomol*), and of many other voluntary political and cultural associations of a bygone epoch. The document is technically a stenogram (from the Russian *stenogramma*)—that is, a precise transcription produced on a stenotype machine. The technique—mainly encountered in the West in tribunals and court reporting—was extensively used in the former USSR to transcribe, in real time, speeches and debates at party congresses and various committee, association, and council meetings.

This stenogram casts some light on the early days of the Union of

¹ The official name is Arhiva Organizatiilor Social Politice a Republicii Moldova (hereafter cited as AOSPRM).

Soviet Artists of Moldavia. As in other Eastern European countries and republics of the former USSR, this type of organization started to appear soon after the advance of the Red Army westward, and as in the case of other former socialist Unions of Artists in the region, the organization is still active, though under a different name: The Union of Artists of Moldova.² Although today its leadership would prefer to see the Union as a direct successor to the pre-Soviet fine arts organizations (such as, for instance, the Bessarabian Belle-Arte Society, which was established in 1921 and dissolved after the Soviet annexation of Bessarabia in 1940), its institutional structure and its very mode of operation still resemble those of the Union of Soviet Artists.³ The document reprinted in the following pages represents an opportunity to step back for a better look at an era when a new type of art institution began to emerge in the countries that had found themselves, after 1945, in the USSR, or even in the larger “socialist bloc.” In most of these countries, the Union of Artists was a very new type of art institution created in the image of the Union of Soviet Artists.⁴

The document, translated from Russian—the lingua franca of all Soviet bureaucracy and of most republic-level organizations, especially in the early Stalinist days of the Moldavian SSR—transcribes excerpts

2 The history of the Union of Soviet Artists of Moldavia begins in 1936 when, on the left bank of the Dniester River, in what was then called the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, or MASSR, a special Organizational Committee of the Union of Soviet Artists of MASSR was established. After the Red Army invaded Bessarabia in 1940 (following the infamous protocol of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact), a similar Committee was formed on the right bank of the Dniester. In 1941, however, many of its initial fifteen members had been enlisted in the Red Army and were sent to the front. It was only at the end of World War II, in 1945, that the regional Union of Soviet Artists of Moldavia was created. It operated under this name until 1957, when it was renamed the Union of Artists of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR), following the formation of the Union of Soviet Artists of the USSR. After 1989 the regional Union was renamed again, and today it is known as the Union of Artists of Moldova (Uniunea Artiștilor Plastici din Republica Moldova; *plastici* here has the same meaning as the French *plastique*). Regarding the early formation of the Union of Soviet Artists of Moldavia, see S. Vakarova, *So'uz khudozhnikov Moldavii 1940–1956; Istoricheskaia spravka*, AOSPRM, F. 2906, I. 1, D. 53, ff. 1–37.

3 See, for instance, Tudor Braga, “Istoric, introducere,” accessed July 21, 2013, <http://www.arta.md/uap/>.

4 The Union of Soviet Artists traces its history to the infamous 1932 decree of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) entitled “On the Reconstruction of the Literary and Artistic Organizations” [O *perestroike literaturno-khudozhestvennykh organizatsii*]. The decree instituted the Soviet creative unions by dissolving previous literary and artistic associations and groups. For a concise historical account of the Union of Soviet Artists, see Marilyn Rueschemeyer, Igor Golomshtok, and Janet Kennedy, *Soviet Émigré Artists: Life and Work in the United States and the USSR* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1984), 37–45.

Союз художников Молдавской сер

Дело
№

Р-2306
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123

Каталог 18^{ти}
республиканской художественной
выставки
1954г.

на 18 листах

Начато 196 г

Окончено 196 г

Крайний: Моешоянцо

from an artist meeting that took place in Kishinev (as the Moldovan capital was called in those days) on May 15, 1951. It was a meeting of the *pravlenie*—that is, of the executive committee of the Union of Soviet Artists of Moldavia.⁵ The committee was summoned to discuss an urgent matter: the annual Republican Exhibition that had been scheduled at a plenum in Moscow to take place in the fall of the same year. Even though, in 1951, the Union of Soviet Artists of Moldavia still legally maintained regional autonomy, like the other Unions of Artists operating throughout the USSR, and even though its Statute (*ustav*) stipulated that its main governing body was the Republican Congress of the Union of Artists, its main activities were, for the most part, directed from Moscow.⁶ At the time of the meeting, the exhibition deadline was approaching quickly, and the Moldavian artists did not have their works ready. In fact, many of them were in a state of great confusion and uncertainty. Pressure was building. The exhibition might not be opened in time, or it might not rise to meet Moscow's expectations.

Like most texts from the immediate postwar Stalinist period, this document says less than it would like to, or perhaps only what it is permitted. The stenogram does not stress that the organization of the exhibition of 1951 (like those of the two previous years) came as an order from Moscow, and it does not directly state that the exhibition was expected to attest to the successful transition of Moldavian artists toward socialism. To organize an exhibition that would prove the social-

5 I choose to translate the Russian word *pravlenie* as “executive committee,” or simply “committee.” I find that other possible translations, such as “board of directors,” “management,” “board,” and “administration,” do not properly express the bureaucratic texture of the Soviet political system in the early 1950s. I will render “committee” (*pravlenie*) in lower case, in order to distinguish it from official Committees (which I capitalize), as in “Committee for Artistic Affairs of the USSR.”

6 In the USSR, the Unions of Soviet Artists were initially established—at least formally—as regional, municipal, and republican organizations that were not subordinate to a single administrative center. It was only in 1957, with the creation of the Union of Soviet Artists of the USSR, that they legally came under the single hierarchical authority of the All-Union Administration of the Union of Soviet Artists. The 1948 Statute (*ustav*) of the Union of Soviet Artists of Moldavia, for instance, stipulated that the Union of Artists was a voluntary social organization that united the creative forces of Moldavian artists, art historians, and critics. The governing body of this Union was the Republican Congress of the Union of Artists, and its executive body was the *pravlenie*—the executive committee of the Union—which was elected at the congresses of the Union by secret ballot. The governmental supervising organ was the Directorate for Artistic Affairs (*Upravlenie po delam iskusstv*) of the Soviet of Ministers of the Moldavian SSR. See *Ustav Soiuza Sovetskikh khudozhnikov Moldavii* 1948, AOSPRM, F. 2906, I. 1, D. 28, ff. 1–7.

ist transformation of local art, but without nearly enough socialist artists, was not a simple task.⁷ The exhibition of 1951 had to prove that a new generation of Moldavian artists, together with the previous generation, had been educated or re-educated to live and work in a nonbourgeois society. This previous generation—some of whom had been trained before the war in Europe, in the spirit of the *École de Paris*—were to absolve themselves of the mortal sin of bourgeois aesthetics, of formalism above all, and of many other *-isms* that distorted and perverted socialist reality. After the war, many artists and art critics were sent, through the Soviet system of labor allocation, to help establish new Soviet cultural infrastructure.⁸ However, these envoys were not yet familiar with the local contexts, and for Socialist Realism to be truthful to its own tenets, it had to be the way Stalin proclaimed it: national in form and socialist in content.

The document published here hints at some of the challenges encountered by the Moldavian artists of the 1950s in their coming to terms with the Soviet model of cultural policy. Acceptance of the socialist mode of artistic production and of the aesthetics of Socialist Realism was especially difficult for the generation of artists who had come to prominence before the war. They had to rid themselves of bourgeois prejudice, of formalism, leftism, expressionism, impressionism, aestheticism (*estestvo*), naturalism, and Cézannism, to name a few. These *-isms*, or their traces, were seen to persist especially when the painter devoted too much attention to formal concerns, when the manipulation of paint on the surface of the canvas drew the viewer's attention away from the theme and subject matter, causing the depicted socialist event or hero of labor to dissolve in and behind exuberant brushstrokes.

When the document suggests that there was little time left before the opening, we must take it at its word. We should keep in mind that

7 The short historical introduction found on the website of the Union of Artists of Moldova asserts that after the annexation of Bessarabia in 1940 the Soviet authorities registered 154 active artists educated in different European centers, whereas the next registration, carried out in 1944, revealed only four artists. Braga, "Istoric, introducecere."

8 The art critic Matus Livshits (also featured in the stenogram) is a good example of such an envoy. Livshits was directed (*napravlen na rabotu*) after graduation from Lomonosov University in Moscow to take the position of research fellow at the Republican Museum of Arts in Kishinev. See Ludmila Toma, "Doctor of History and Theory of Fine Arts Matus Livshits (1920–2007)," accessed July 20, 2013, <http://chisinaul.blogspot.com/2013/01/doctor-of-history-and-theory-of-fine.html>.

any attempt at submitting spontaneous and incomplete artworks, which the bourgeois expressionist might have valued for their genuine manifestations of individual freedom, would be condemned with the utmost abhorrence and collectively denounced under such epithets as “sketchiness and unfinishedness” (*etiudnosti i nezavershonost*).⁹ By turning a blind eye to completeness and totality, the artist risked presenting a fragmentary and distorted picture of reality. Any preoccupation with external impressions, internal expressions, individualism, and the subjective representations of incomplete, momentary, and transitory feelings were also regarded as remnants of the bourgeois era. After all, the Union’s main task had been to prevent Moldavian artists from slipping back into bourgeois idealism, to prevent their detachment from reality. This was not a simple matter of aesthetics, but related directly to political problems, as Socialist Realism does not separate or distinguish between the two. An impressionistic or expressionistic artistic treatment or a fragmentary view of reality manifested nothing less than a lack of moral fiber, selfishness and possessive individualism, antisocial sentiment, and the pursuit of personal gain—all qualities that, in 1951, were regarded as part of American business culture.¹⁰

To help overcome and prevent these shortcomings, artists had to educate themselves. They had to attend courses in Marxist-Leninist aesthetics in the hope of developing a socialist consciousness; they met frequently with art critics in order to analyze their aesthetic and political shortcomings. At the time, the main role of the art critic was not to “curate” or “manage” artists, but to help them overcome theoretical, philosophical, and historical problems, to help them look at the “bright side” of reality. The Union, on the whole, existed in order to support the artists both ideologically and materially, to motivate them to work within a radically new reality—one that relied on neither a capitalist art market nor a bourgeois art world.

Today, in our anticollectivist, liberal ideological environment, this 1951 stenogram may provoke different reactions. Some may find it naive, or even comical. In part this is due to the ridicule and vilification that its brand of prose, which brings to mind the squealing hinges and

9 AOSPRM, F. 2906, I. 1, D. 53, f. 248.

10 In 1951, qualities associated with Anglo-American business ethics were regarded as the antipode of a truly Marxist-Leninist consciousness. *Ibid.*, f. 99.

dripping faucets of dilapidated communal buildings, has tended to provoke during the neoliberal transition of the 1990s. The document reads like fiction: it is now almost impossible to imagine that “grown-up” artists could have once sat and discussed the organization of an exhibition in such terms. And if it were a work of fiction, it would be one that draws a curtain over the first-person pronoun *I*, playing up instead the virtues of human solidarity and creative collective effort.

One should also recall the immediate historical context in which this document was produced. Stenograms from the same archive, but recorded at a later stage (the 1960s and 1970s), present quite a different picture of artists’ meetings and congresses, with artists standing up for their “formalist” tendencies or speaking openly about their quest for the national spirit.¹¹ The gradual drifting toward the right, toward the “national in form” (at the expense of socialist content), which had begun with some artists already in the 1960s, took a sharp turn after 1989. During the transition to capitalism and the art market of the 1990s, the renamed Union of Artists of Moldova made a radical right turn, both politically and artistically. In political terms, and content-wise, the Union ceased to depict socialist reality, or the bygone heroes of socialist labor and party leaders, turning its attention instead to a resurrected national culture, to the illustrious events and figures of the national past. A discredited Socialist Realism was soon covered over by a new brand of aesthetics, absorbing, at once, conservative religious-nationalist and modernist liberal-humanist ideals and values. The central concepts of *collectivity* and *internationalist solidarity* were superseded by those of *nation* and *blood and soil*. In artistic or formal terms, the post-1989 Union of Moldovan Artists has remained on the conservative side of the artistic scene. Today many of its members pass themselves off as defenders of artistic tradition and skill against a new archenemy, “contemporary art,” which the most orthodox Union members regard as an alien cultural form, a decoy brought in by the West in order to conceal the true face of contemporary, predatory capitalism.

The stenogram of the 1951 exhibition is a very large document. Due to space restrictions, I have translated only some excerpts.

11 A good example of such manifestations of national spirit is the work of Mihail Greuc (1916–98), who is featured in this 1951 stenogram. For references to the national spirit in the work of Valentina Rusu-Ciobanu, Mihail Greuc, Gleb Sainciuc, and Filimon Hamuraru, see AOSPRM, F. 2906, I. I, D. 291, f. 111.