

BETWEEN PASTORAL ROOTS AND POLITICAL SHADOWS: THE VISIBILITY AND GLOBAL CIRCULATION OF ROMANIAN FOLKLORE

Abstract: Romanian folklore, despite its richness, remains marginal within global cultural consciousness compared to German, Russian, or Scandinavian traditions. This essay analyses the historical, political, and cultural factors that have constrained its international visibility, including late scholarly codification, linguistic barriers, political interference during the communist period, and persistent cultural stereotypes. Drawing on folklore studies and translation theory, my essay argues that global circulation depends less on cultural value than on systems of archiving, translation, and mediation. The figure of Dracula is examined as a case study of cultural misrepresentation illustrating how popular culture has simultaneously increased Romania's visibility but also distorted perceptions of the country. The essay concludes by emphasising the need for more responsible, contextualised forms of cultural mediation.

Key words: Romanian folklore, cultural visibility, translation studies, cultural mediation, popular culture, misrepresentation, national identity, global circulation

According to DEX,¹ folklore is commonly understood as “the body of all artistic, literary, musical, visual, etc. artefacts, customs, and folk traditions of a country or region.”² Since William J. Thoms introduced the term in 1846, folklore has referred both to these practices themselves and to the discipline that studies them.³ In the Romanian context, scholars such as B. P. Hasdeu (1887) and Ovid Densușianu (1937) emphasised folklore to be a manifestation of the national spirit, rooted in language, oral creativity, and rural life.⁴ Romanian folklore was thus framed early on as a repository of national memory rather than as a closed mythological system. Despite this conceptual richness, Romanian folklore remains marginal within global cultural circulation. When compared to German, Russian, or Scandinavian traditions, the contrast is striking. The fairy tales collected by the Brothers Grimm, Russian folktales recorded from the seventeenth century onwards, and Norse mythology preserved through medieval textual corpora have all achieved sustained international visibility.⁵ Romanian folklore, by contrast, appears fragmented, unevenly translated, and often misrepresented.⁶ This disparity raises a central

1. DEX stands for *Dicționarul explicativ al limbii române* (The Romanian Explanatory Dictionary).

2. See DEX, <https://dexonline.ro/definitie/folclor>. The translation of the definition is mine. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations provided in this article are mine.

3. William John Thoms, “Folk-lore,” *The Athenaeum*, August 22, 1846, [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Athenaeum_\(British_magazine\)/Issue_982/Folk-lore](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Athenaeum_(British_magazine)/Issue_982/Folk-lore). See also Duncan Emrich, “‘Folk-Lore’: William John Thoms,” *California Folklore Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (Oct. 1946): 355–374.

4. Ovid Densușianu, *Folklorul, cum trebuie înțeles*, 2nd edition (Editura P. Suru, 1937), 13 and B. Petriceicu Hasdeu, *Dicționarul limbii istorice și populare a românilor* (Stabilimentul Grafic I. V. Socecu, 1887), 15.

5. See German Culture, *German Fairy Tales: How Brothers Grimm Shaped World Literature*, <https://germanculture.com.ua/german-traditions/german-fairy-tales-how-brothers-grimm-shaped-world-literature/>, Chi Luu, “The Fairytale Language of the Brothers Grimm,” *JSTOR Daily*, May 2, 2018, <https://daily.jstor.org/the-fairytale-language-of-the-brothers-grimm/>, MacKenzie Stuart, “The True Story of the Brothers Grimm,” *Explore the Archive*, December 16, 2024, <https://explorethearchive.com/undefined>, Ariel Moniz, “The Voice of a Culture: Folktales in Russia,” *Hohonu*, no. 14 (2016): 47–54, Emma Groeneveld, “Norse Mythology,” *World History Encyclopedia*, November 2017, www.worldhistory.org, https://www.worldhistory.org/Norse_Mythology/, Norman, “The Origins of the Norse Mythology,” *The Norse Gods*, February 14, 2009, <https://thenorsegods.com/the-origins-of-the-norse-mythology/>, and Zoe Merchant, “Nordic Folklore: 12 Creatures from Norse Mythology,” *Routes North*, September 1, 2023, <https://www.routesnorth.com/scandinavia/nordic-folklore-12-creatures-from-norse-mythology/>.

6. Alin Rus, “The Instrumentalization of Cultural Heritage in Ceaușescu’s Romania,” *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 13, no. 4 (July 2024): 1–14, Mihai

paradox: how can a tradition so central to national identity remain so peripheral internationally?

This essay argues that Romanian folklore's limited global visibility is not the result of cultural inferiority, but of historical and structural conditions. Late scholarly codification, political interference, linguistic barriers, and selective translation have all shaped its circulation. Popular culture, particularly through the figure of Dracula, has further distorted international perceptions, functioning as an overly exploited but misleading cultural symbol.⁷ By examining these factors, this essay explores how folklore circulates globally and how translation operates as a form of cultural mediation that both enables and constrains visibility.

The Late Formation and Fragmentation of Romanian Folklore

Romanian folklore entered academic circulation late and without a unified corpus. As Romanian folklorists have repeatedly observed, Romanian mythology lacks a coherent pantheon comparable to those of classical or Nordic traditions.⁸ Instead, it consists of dispersed narratives, rituals, and symbolic figures rooted in pastoral life and seasonal cycles.⁹ This structure reflects the social realities from which it emerged, but it has also complicated scholarly classification and international reception. The first significant efforts to bundle Romanian folklore occurred in the nineteenth century, notably through Vasile Alecsandri and Petre Ispirescu.¹⁰ Their collections preserved a substantial body of oral literature and brought folklore into literary and urban contexts. Yet these efforts coincided with a period in which Romanian cultural identity was still being negotiated.¹¹ Folklore was often mobilised as evidence of historical continuity rather than analysed as an autonomous cultural system.¹² A comparison with German folklore is revealing. The

Coman, *Introducere în antropologia culturală: Mitul și ritul* (Polirom, 2008), Corneliu Bucur, *50 ani în căutarea identității* (Editura ALTIP, 2013), Maurice Mengel, "New Country, New Song: On Utopia in Romanian Ethnomusicology of the Early Socialist Era," in *Historical Sources and Source Criticism: ICTM Study Group on Historical Sources: Proceedings from the 17th International Conference in Stockholm, Sweden* (May 21–25, 2008), 117–130, and Jan H. Brunvad, "The Study of Romanian Folklore," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 9, no. 2–3 (Dec. 1972): 133–61.

7. Duncan Light, "Dracula Tourism in Romania: Cultural Identity and the State," *Annals of Tourism Research* 54, no. 3 (2007): 746–765.

8. Coman, *Introducere*, 313–314.

9. Coman, *Introducere*, 313–314.

10. Mihai Pop and Pavel Ruxăndoiu, *Folclor literar românesc* (Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 1991), 16.

11. Bucur, *50 ani*, 170.

12. Rus, "The Instrumentalization," 6–7.

Brothers Grimm benefitted from early institutional support, a developing philological tradition, and a clear methodological framework.¹³ Their work established folklore as both a national and comparative discipline. Romanian folklore lacked comparable infrastructure and remained under-researched well into the twentieth century, with inconsistent archiving and limited international dissemination.¹⁴

Recent scholarship, however, suggests a renewed effort to reassess these structural limitations. The publication of Antoaneta Olteanu's *Mitologia română* (2021) signals a contemporary interest in reconsidering Romanian mythological material from a more systematic perspective. While the present essay does not engage directly with Olteanu's analysis, the appearance of such work indicates a broader scholarly movement aimed at challenging long-standing assumptions about the coherence and status of Romanian mythology. This renewed academic engagement is important as the perception that Romanian folklore lacks a recognisable mythological framework has long contributed to its marginalisation in international contexts.

Political Factors

Political history played a decisive role in shaping both the content and circulation of Romanian folklore. In the interwar period, folklore became increasingly linked to national identity, serving as a symbolic resource in the consolidation of the modern Romanian state.¹⁵ This process intensified under communism, when folklore was transformed into an ideological instrument. During the first socialist period, folklore was not merely preserved but actively reshaped. Traditional practices were extracted from their local contexts and reinvented as staged performances aligned with nationalist and socialist narratives.¹⁶ The construction of Dacian and pre-Dacian myths illustrates how folklore was mobilised to create a sense of historical permanence compatible with political objectives.¹⁷

This process of ideological intervention affected both terminology and modes of performance. The *doina*, a music genre traditionally defined by improvisation, emotional intensity, and contextual flexibility, was gradually reframed within the broader and administratively convenient category of *muzică populară*.¹⁸ This reclassification facilitated

13. Luu, "The Fairytale Language."

14. Bucur, 50 ani, 169–170.

15. Mengel, "New Country, New Song."

16. Mengel, "New Country, New Song," 118.

17. Coman, *Introducere*, 314.

18. Gabriel Zamfir, "Lyrical Contours of Doina from Oltenia: Characteristics and

its inclusion in state-sponsored repertoires, amateur ensembles, and stage performances, but it also encouraged formal standardisation and stylistic homogenisation.¹⁹ As ethnomusicological research and cultural policy increasingly prioritised legibility, typology, and scenic presentation, local variation and performer agency were diminished.²⁰ Folklore was not suppressed outright; rather, it was reshaped to conform to ideological expectations and institutional formats.²¹ In becoming more visible to the state and suitable for controlled circulation, it simultaneously lost credibility as a living, self-regulating tradition embedded in everyday social practice. The Iron Curtain further restricted circulation. Cultural exchange with the West was minimal, translations were rare, and Romanian folklore remained largely inaccessible to non-Romanian audiences.²² Romanian folklore was thus not merely neglected internationally but actively reshaped internally and systematically isolated externally.

This dynamic continued into the later communist period in relation to the Dracula myth itself. As Valentin Gheondea demonstrates, the Romanian state, particularly through the Securitate, adopted an ambivalent position toward Dracula: while officially rejecting its association with national identity due to its foreign and fictional origins, authorities were simultaneously aware of its potential economic value in attracting Western tourism.²³ Consequently, the regime oscillated between suppression and strategic tolerance, attempting to control the narrative while selectively benefiting from its global popularity. This contradiction highlights how cultural symbols could be politically managed, reinforcing the idea that visibility is not merely a matter of circulation but also of institutional negotiation and control.

Language, Translation and Untranslatability

Language constitutes one of the most persistent barriers to the global circulation of Romanian folklore. Romanian is a less widely

Analysis," *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov* 13, no. 1 (2020): <https://doi.org/10.31926/but.pa.2020.13.62.1.19>. 1.

19. Theodor Constantiniu, "Folklore and Dialectical Materialism: A Case Study of Ethnomusicological Research in Communist Romania," *Studia UBB Musica* 65, no. 2 (2020): 267–272.

20. Cristina Șuteu, "Censorship of Music and Music of Censorship: The Muzica Journal during Romanian Communism," *Musicology Today* 14, no. 2 (June 2023): 144.

21. Constantiniu, "Folklore," 273.

22. Mengel, "New Country, New Song," 124.

23. Valentin Gheonea, "The Securitate Versus Dracula, Tourism and Ideology in Communist Romania," *Journal of Dracula Studies* 24, no. 1: article 7.

spoken language, and folklore as an oral form is particularly resistant to translation.²⁴ Rhythm, performance context, and cultural symbolism are difficult to transfer without loss. Translation scholars have therefore stressed that translation does not merely transmit meaning but reframes it within new cultural coordinates.²⁵ Only a limited number of Romanian texts have been circulated widely through translation. *Miorița* remains the most prominent example, particularly Alecsandri's adapted version, whose circulation reflects translatability rather than representativeness.²⁶ Similarly, *Tinerete fără bătrânețe și viață fără de moarte* [Youth Without Age and Life Without Death] has gained attention because its emphasis on immortality resonates with universal philosophical concerns.²⁷ A quality that has also inspired contemporary artistic activity, such as British photographer Laura Pannack's work *Youth Without Age and Life Without Death*, in which she uses imagery rooted in the folktale to explore notions of time, presence, and the intangible.²⁸ *Harap-Alb* has achieved renewed visibility through modern reinterpretation that reframes the tale for contemporary audiences.²⁹ These examples reveal the selective nature of translation. Texts are circulated not because they represent the entirety of Romanian folklore, but because they align with familiar narrative patterns. Thus, translation functions as cultural mediation, shaping how Romanian identity is perceived abroad.

Dracula and the Global Misrepresentation of Romanian Folklore

The most visible international association with Romania is not a folkloric figure, but a literary one. Before the emergence of Dracula as a

24. Brunvad, "The Study," 134.

25. Harieta Topoliceanu, "Cultureme în traducere: Note privind traducerea italiană a poveștilor lui Creangă," in *Translation and Cultural Mediation: Myths, Legends and Fairytales in Romania and across the World/ Traducere și mediere culturală: Mituri, legende și povești din România și din lume*, eds. Roxana Ciocăleanu and Paul Nanu (University of Turku, 2020), 52.

26. See Nicolae Brana, *Miorița* (Dacia, 1975).

27. Raluca Nicolae, "Cultural Readings of the Japanese Translation of 'Tinerete fără bătrânețe și viață fără de moarte,'" in *Translation and Cultural Mediation: Myths, Legends and Fairytales in Romania and across the World*, 28–30.

28. Tim Adams, "The Big Picture: In Search of a Land Where Time Stands Still," *The Guardian*, November 19, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2023/nov/19/the-big-picture-time-stands-still-romania-laura-pannack-youth-without-age>.

29. See Michael Haulică, "Fantasy & Science-Fiction: Premiile care au fost," *Observator cultural*, October 13, 2005, <https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/fantasy-science-fiction-premiile-care-au-fost-2/> and *De-as Fi... Harap Alb*, directed by Ion Popescu-Gopo, with Florin Piersic et al. (Romfilm, 1966).

global cultural symbol, the figure of the vampire had already been re-shaped through Western cultural mediation. As Anca Simina Martin argues, nineteenth and early twentieth-century cultural products imported into Romania played a decisive role in reframing indigenous beliefs in *strigoi* within the broader Gothic imaginary. Rather than being transmitted directly from Romanian folklore, the vampire became associated with narrative conventions emphasising individual monstrosity, fear, and supernatural spectacle, which differed significantly from the communal and ritual functions of the *strigoi* in local belief systems.³⁰ This process suggests that what is now perceived as “Romanian vampirism” is, to a considerable extent, the result of Western interpretative frameworks imposed upon and subsequently re-exposed as part of Romanian cultural identity.

Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* is not a product of Romanian folklore, but of Western literary imagination, drawing on travel literature, Saxon propaganda surrounding Vlad Țepeș.³¹ Nevertheless, *Dracula* has become a cultural reference shaping global perceptions of Romania. Research on *Dracula* tourism demonstrates how Romania has been transformed into a symbolic “vampire land”, characterised by exoticism and spectacle.³² This process overshadows authentic traditions and produces forms of “fakelore”³³ designed to meet external expectations. This externally driven construction of *Dracula* is accompanied by an equally complex reception within Romania itself. Survey responses from Romanian participants reveal an ambivalent attitude toward the association between *Dracula* and national identity. While some respondents acknowledge its usefulness in promoting tourism and international visibility, others reject it as a misleading conflation of fictional narrative and historical figure, particularly in relation to Vlad Țepeș.³⁴ This tension illustrates an ongoing negotiation between economic pragmatism and cultural authenticity, suggesting that *Dracula* functions not only as

30. Anca Simina Martin, “The Trope of the Vampire (and Strigoi) in Romanian Culture and Cultural Products Imported to Romania (1839–1947),” *Transilvania*, no. 7 (2023): 17–25.

31. See Light, “*Dracula* Tourism,” 749 and Toumas Hovi, “*Dracula* Tourism, Folklore and Cultural Heritage,” *Traditiones* 40, no. 3 (2011): 83.

32. Hovi, “*Dracula* Tourism,” 83 and A. J. Dalton, “Geo-Political Vampirism: How and Why Has Western Literary Scholarship Appropriated and the Re-Mythologised the Socio-Historical Origins of the Vampire?” *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 11, no. 1 (Apr. 2024): 4.

33. Hovi, “*Dracula* Tourism,” 80.

34. “Comunitate,” *Dracula*, October 13, 2019, <https://dracula.info.ro/tara-lui-dracula/comunitate/>.

an externally imposed image but also as a contested symbol within Romanian society. Folklore centred on community, ritual, and pastoral life is displaced by commodified narratives of monstrosity.



Figure 1 Souvenirs at the Christmas Fair in Sibiu in 2025

Beyond Dracula, the visibility of Romanian folklore is also influenced by broader stereotypes associated with Romanians abroad. In many Western contexts, Romania is framed through reductive narratives emphasising marginality, poverty, or post-socialist dysfunction. As Carole Cadwalladr observes, “it turns out that not only do we know hardly anything about Romania, but what we do know isn’t even true.”³⁵ Such misperceptions influence cultural reception,

35. Carole Cadwalladr, “Romania: Hellhole or Country of Romance and Mystery?”

making Romanian traditions less likely to be approached as legitimate sources of symbolic knowledge and more likely to be ignored or exoticised.³⁶ Visibility is therefore shaped not only by circulation but by perception: when a culture is burdened by negative stereotypes, its folklore struggles to gain recognition within global hierarchies. These stereotypes also affect translation and mediation. Publishers and cultural institutions tend to privilege traditions associated with prestige, familiarity, and profit. Romanian folklore, operating under unfavourable assumptions, encounters structural barriers to translation and promotion. When it is circulated, it is often framed through existing tropes of otherness, reinforcing rather than challenging cultural distance.

Contemporary Visibility: Revival, Social Media, and UNESCO

Recent developments indicate a gradual reconfiguration of Romanian folklore's visibility. The inclusion of *doina* in UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity reframes Romanian folklore as a living cultural practice rather than a static relic.³⁷ Scholarly engagement has also increased, with renewed attention to archives, translation, and cultural mediation, as I learned during a semester abroad at the Faculty of Letters and Arts, Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, in 2025.

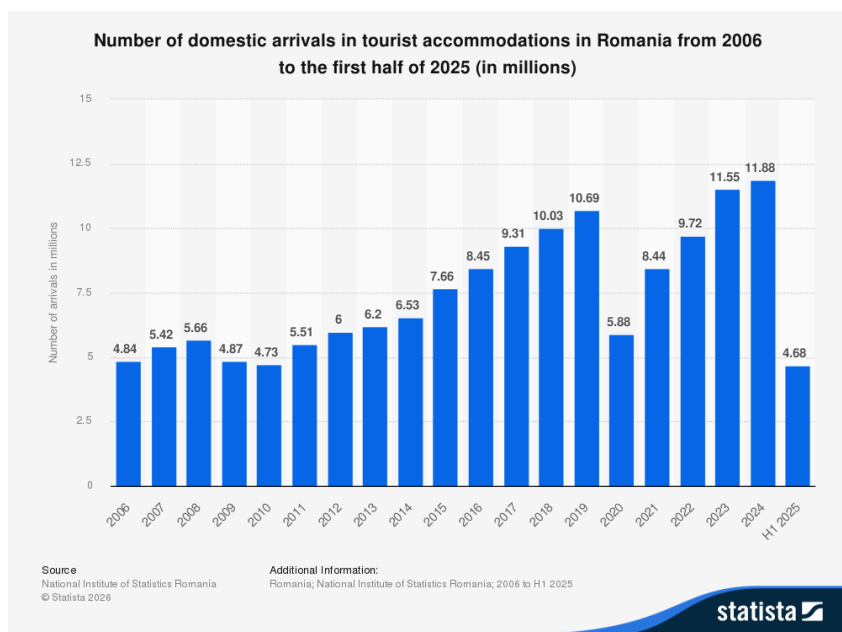
Moreover, Romania's tourism sector has been expanding, attracting increasing numbers of visitors that could serve as potential cultural "ambassadors" for cultural forms beyond the familiar Dracula narratives. In the first half of 2025, Romania hosted nearly 5.8 million tourists in accommodation establishments, including over 1.1 million international visitors, marking a measurable rise in global interest.³⁸ However, might this interest still be highly motivated by Dracula? And is it even real interest or rather more people being able to travel thanks to low-cost airlines or EU-membership?

The Guardian, March 20, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/20/romania-hellhole-or-mysterious-romanticism-europe-uncovered>.

36. Hovi, "Dracula Tourism," 83.

37. UNESCO, "Doina," <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/doina-00192>.

38. Statista, "Number of Tourist Arrivals in Romania 2025," Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/413253/number-of-arrivals-spent-in-short-stay-accommodation-in-romania-and-TTW, Italy, Germany, United Kingdom and More Ignite Romania's Tourism Boom with Over Five Million Arrivals, Extended Vacations and Surging Global Demand—Travel and Tour World, August 21, 2025, https://www.travelandtourworld.com/news/article/italy-germany-united-kingdom-and-more-ignite-romania-s-tourism-boom-with-over-five-million-arrivals-extended-vacations-and-surging-global-demand/>.



Growth in foreign travel suggests that global audiences are entering the country and could encounter its intangible heritage directly rather than through reductive stereotypes. Contemporary Romanian literature is also part of this broader cultural resurgence. The international translation and reception of figures such as Mircea Cărtărescu, whose *Blinding* trilogy has been published in English and widely discussed in international media, demonstrate that Romanian voices can circulate beyond national borders and contribute to global cultural discourses. Cărtărescu's work has been positioned by critics as bridging Eastern and Western literary traditions and has garnered acclaim in anglophone contexts, signalling a growing interest in Romanian cultural production more generally.³⁹ Such literary visibility complements folkloric visibility and suggests that translation itself can be a vehicle for challenging stereotypes and expanding global attention to Romanian creativity.

Digital platforms have altered circulation patterns by enabling individuals to present folklore outside institutional frameworks.

39. Philip Oltermann, "‘I Took Literary Revenge against the People Who Stole My Youth’: Romanian Author Mircea Cărtărescu," *The Guardian*, November 30, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2025/nov/30/romanian-author-mircea-cartarescu-blinding-trilogy>.

However, increased visibility does not automatically produce understanding. Simplification and aestheticization remain persistent risks within global digital culture. Therefore, Romanian folklore does not merely need greater visibility, but forms of visibility that preserve cultural context and resist stereotyping.

Conclusion

This essay has shown that the limited global visibility of Romanian folklore cannot be attributed to a lack of cultural richness, but rather to a combination of historical, political, linguistic, and representational factors. Late scholarly codification, inconsistent archiving, and restricted translation delayed its entry into international circulation, while political intervention during the communist period reshaped folklore into an ideologically legible but culturally constrained form. These conditions affected not only how Romanian folklore was preserved and transmitted, but also how it could be received and understood beyond national borders. Within this context, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* emerges as a powerful yet deeply ambivalent force. As a globally recognisable cultural symbol, *Dracula* has undeniably increased Romania's visibility within popular imagination. However, this visibility has come at a significant cost. Detached from Romanian folklore and rooted instead in Western literary fantasy and travel narratives, *Dracula* functions as a reductive symbolic shortcut that eclipses rather than represents Romania's vernacular traditions. By privileging spectacle, exoticism, and commodification, the *Dracula* myth has contributed to the marginalisation of folkloric forms grounded in ritual, oral performance, and pastoral life.

Nevertheless, *Dracula* does not operate in isolation. Its dominance is reinforced by broader stereotypes surrounding Romania, which shape reception as much as circulation. Romanian folklore is not only overshadowed by *Dracula* but also constrained by pre-existing assumptions that frame Romanian culture as peripheral or backward. In such conditions, translation and cultural mediation become selective, privileging narratives that confirm familiar expectations rather than those that challenge them. However, recent developments suggest the possibility of a more nuanced form of visibility. The recognition of *doina* by UNESCO, the growing international circulation of Romanian literature, and the increasing number of international visitors indicate that Romanian culture is entering global circuits through multiple channels. Yet visibility alone is insufficient. As this essay has pointed out, what matters is not simply that Romanian folklore becomes visible, but how it becomes visible. Without careful contextualisation,

increased exposure to outer audience risks reproducing simplification and stereotype rather than fostering understanding.

In conclusion, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* does overshadow Romanian folklore, but only because historical, political, and cultural conditions have allowed this. The future visibility of Romanian folklore depends on resisting reductive narratives and investing in responsible forms of translation, scholarship, and cultural mediation that allow folklore to circulate on its own terms, as a living and complex expression of cultural identity. Ultimately, the question is not whether Romanian folklore can become globally visible, but whether global audiences are prepared and willing to encounter it beyond the familiar shadows of distorting narratives.

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