The "Bulgarian Berlin Wall":

Contesting the Past, Thinking the "Post-", Imagining the Future through the Space of the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia

By

Roberta Koleva

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Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology

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Supervisors:

Prof. Judit Bodnar

Prof. Claudio Sopranzetti

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Abstract

This research delves into the recent debates surrounding the dismantling of the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia, initiated in December 2023 amidst the Russian-led war in Ukraine. Utilising ethnographic observations, in-depth interviews, and archival, visual and discourse analysis, it explores how this site functions as a territory where the past, present, and future are actively negotiated and re-imagined. Viewing space not merely as a "lens" but as a "social territory", the study employs a Lefebvrian framework to analyse how different clusters of spatial arguments reflect everyday geopolitics, identity tensions, and negotiations concerning "Bulgarianness", "Europeanness", and "democracy", spurred by the ongoing war in Ukraine. The term "Bulgarian Berlin Wall" that puts into comparison the Monument to the Soviet Army and the Berlin Wall is an emic metaphor derived from the field, underscoring the symbolic struggles over the re-imagination of the Bulgarian "European"/"Western" path concerning not only the country's geopolitical positioning but also old discussions about its "civilisational" choices. In alignment with Lefebvre's notion that transformative shifts necessitate the creation of new space, the Monument, much like the Wall, came to be seen by some citizens as a lingering obstacle to post-socialist transition and a desired "normal" future more than 30 years after 1989. In this sense, this thesis critically revisits theoretical discussions on "post-socialism", examining emic understandings of concepts such as "transition", "democracy", "good life", "communism", and "fascism" and how they are instrumentalised amid state-led neoliberal policies. It also contributes to understanding the evolving nature of anti-communist rhetoric, memory and identity crisis in post-socialist public spaces and the built environment's relationship with ideology, social mobilisations, and nationalism.

Contents

Introduction

"A revolution that does not produce a new space has not realized its full potential; indeed it has failed in that it has not changed life itself, but has merely changed ideological superstructures, institutions or political apparatuses." (Lefebvre 1991: 54)

Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia, 2023

It was a sizzling summer night in mid-August 2023 in the heart of my hometown, Sofia. Just as usual, 37 meters above the ground in Knyazheska Garden[1], a concrete Soviet Army soldier was pointing his Shpagin submachine gun at the starless sky. This time, however, an unfamiliar scent permeated the air. Moments before the wail of sirens and the pulsating lights of police vehicles, the Monument to the Soviet Army[2] found itself engulfed in red pyro smoke and echoes of turmoil. *"Not the tents, guys! Call for backup",* shouted a group of people from a protest tent camp set in defence of the memorial from a recent decision for its dismantling[3]. *"Goodbye, communists", "Screw you, Russian wh*res"*, rang out from another group of around twenty masked men who unexpectedly expanded the landscape of resistance that night. Arriving minutes after 9 pm, fresh from a football derby in the city, they were armed with hammers and a large banner with the word "DISMANTLING" [DEMONTAZH], with the communist sign embedded in the letter "O" and crossed out. These were fans of Levski Sofia's football team, along with representatives of various nationalist organisations. Moments before four of them got arrested by the police, they managed to break the plaque on the Monument, which bore the original inscription, "To the Soviet Army

[1] A central city garden, that used to be a royal garden (see Chapter 3). Its name can be translated as "Prince's Garden".
[2] From now on– often just "the Monument".
[3] It included members of three pro-Kremlin political formations – the non-parliamentary leftist political group Levitsata, the far-right party Vazrazhdane, and the Bulgarian Socialist Party, together with supporters of these parties and other citizens.

Liberator from the Grateful Bulgarian People". Below, they spray-painted "We Want a Bulgarian Monument."[4]

Attackers holding a banner with the word "dismantling". Unknown author.

The broken plaque with the inscription "To the Soviet Army Liberator from the Grateful Bulgarian People". Below: "We Want a Bulgarian Monument". August 2023.

[44] All pictures in this document are taken by the author, except if it is pointed otherwise.

Left and far-right pro-Russian parties defending the Monument together from the plans for its dismantling. August 2023.

At the end of the year, one December morning the same Soviet Army soldier woke up to the sounds of a hammer and drill machine. A big crane had hung above his head. After more than 30 years of disputes, surrounded by increased police presence, workers began to dismantle the installation before the exited applause of two opposing crowds – from the one side people wearing European flags and on the other – Russian. The "Bulgarian Berlin Wall", as I heard somebody in the crowd calling the monument, was going down in history.

Since the socio-economic transformations of 1989, the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia has witnessed a steady stream of artistic transformations and protest actions, as part of the broader post-socialist attempts to restructure public space amidst the deep crisis of memory (Znepolski 2004).

However, despite the various attempts at its dismantling through the years, the site and similar war memorials in the country remained intact (Vukov 2006: 284) – at least until recently. The plaque that was broken that turbulent August night revealed a double-stick tape underneath, with which the "guardians" of the memorial had tried to cover an attack from a few months earlier. On 23rd February, the day of the Red Army, and one day before the anniversary of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Svetlozar Rayanov, a retired ecologist, had smashed it with a hammer, in his own words, as a protest "against Putin" and "Russian imperialism" (interview with S. Rayanov).

Although Russian influence has significantly permeated Bulgarian nationalist discourse since the post-socialist transition (Stanchev 2023), the war brought about its fragmentation, simultaneously awakening the continuing "zombie socialist" rhetoric in the political scene (Chelcea & Druta 2016) and igniting old debates about Bulgaria's "civilisational" choices. Much like in Ukraine, where the Russian invasion aroused a new wave of "cleansing" of all traces of Soviet heritage (Betlii 2022), in Bulgaria this external shock marked a peak in the post-1989 disruption of the "Brotherly help" discourse that characterised Bulgarian-Russian relations for a long time (Vukov 2006), eventually leading to the official decision to dismantle the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia[5]. By late December, the installation of the top was taken down, with no official plans for the remaining compositions of the memorial complex and the space around it. The 27-meter-long plinth, once holding the Soviet Soldier was left empty – both a reminder of the contested past and a new stage for imaginaries about the desired future.

[5] After a series of resolutions effectively paving the way for the city council to proceed with the monument's removal, by late August the site found itself surrounded by metal scaffoldings as part of the preparation for the dismantling.

Contributing to a body of previous scholarship on the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia and other similar monuments in the country[6], this study aims to ethnographically grasp this awkward current state of "unfinishedness" in which the semi-dismantled monument has become a territory for geopolitical tensions, identity negotiations and spatial thinking, where different propositions about the development of the space around it reflect different speculations about the imagined "future". The main questions of this study, therefore, are: What is the role of space in the current political struggles in Bulgaria? How was the external shock of the war in Ukraine instrumentalised in the local political scene? How are the relationships between 1) Bulgaria and its past, 2) Bulgaria and the Soviet Union/the Russian Federation, and 3) Bulgaria and Europe/the "West" currently re-imagined through the space of the Monument to the Soviet Army? How does contestation of the Monument reflect emic understandings of "transition", "democracy", and "good life"?

Hence, looking at space and time as organisational configurations for different clusters of arguments, this thesis focuses on the Monument to the Soviet Army as a contested territory through which different groups of people actively negotiate and re-imagine the past, present, and future, analysing how these contestations reflect the broader quest for "democracy", "Europeanness", and "Bulgarianness" more than 30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

[6] Nikolai Vukov has been contributing to the field for many years, with numerous publications on the history and fate of socialist monuments before and after 1989, specifically such devoted to the Soviet Army and the narrative disturbance and memory crisis around them (for example Vukov, 2003, 2006, 2009, 2021). Concerning the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia, various aspects of its appropriations and transformations in the post-socialist period and different artistic interventions have been explored (for example Dimitrova 2016, Preda 2023). Among the few scholarships trying to trace the bottom-up construction of the memorial by the new generations is Christina Dimitrova's work "Appropriations of Urban Space as Resistance: The Soviet Army Monument in Sofia" (Dimitrova 2016). Agova (2013) has explored the usage of the Monument around the 2013's #ДАНС-withme anti-government protests in the country, while Traykov (2012) follows the transformation of the Monument as an act of symbolic struggle over the country's paths toward "modernity". I aim to contribute to the findings of all these authors by focusing on different questions, concerning the contemporary socio-political dynamics in the country.

Space as a Social Territory, Spatial Imaginations and Temporalities

As I consider these inquiries, I am contemplating alongside Henri Lefebvre, "who has been more influential than any other scholar in opening up and exploring the limitless dimensions of our social spatiality" (Soja 1996: 6). In his most famous book "The Production of Space" the French philosopher proposes that every society fully realises itself as such namely in a spatial shape: *"*Any "social existence" aspiring or claiming to be 'real', but failing to produce its own space, would be a strange entity, a very peculiar kind of abstraction unable to escape from the ideological or even the "cultural" realm." (Lefebvre 1991: 53)[7].

Therefore, for Lefebvre space and the built environment are not simply a lens through which to observe how society is "taking shape", but a "social" territory through which political debates are worked out. It is not a passive "container" where the structural forces materialise themselves, but a socially produced and in turn producing terrain in which the fabric of everyday life and practices create meanings, values, signs and symbols.

In this view, to understand political battles, one should not ignore their spatial dimensions. Caught between the macrostructural dynamics and the microcosms of everyday experiences, this dialectical approach allows going beyond the long-lasting tradition of debilitating dualism in urban studies between political economy and phenomenology (Qian & An 2020: 679). Instead, it enables comprehending both the material and semiotic as co-constitutive moments of the public space, that emerges as a natural arena for contention, where not only do diverse social actors coexist, but they also engage in the inevitable clash of their ideologies, values, desires, and needs (Lefebvre 1991).

[7] Ironically, when Lefebvre talks about the role of revolution in producing a new space, he focuses on the space of state socialism – the one that many of my interlocutors in this thesis oppose. Nevertheless, his ideas are important for understanding how political negotiations are worked out in a spatial form, and as I show in Chapter 2, can help comprehend the role of space when thinking about "transition".

Following this approach, I am looking at the space of the Monument to the Soviet Amry in Sofia as a territory through which the ongoing political and symbolic struggles are being worked out.

Moreover, in my attempt to grasp how different social groups negotiate the past, present and future, I follow Doreen Massey's concept of space as "dynamic simultaneity" (Massey 2005: 55) and her idea that space should always be analysed together with time. Based on her suggestions on how social relations are "stretched-out" into the spatial (ibid: 185), I aim to talk about how different imaginaries concerning “Bulgarianness”, “Europeanness” and “democracy” are unfolded spatially.

Political Iconoclasm

Within this context monuments have historically represented key points for political iconography, expressing the ambitions of state governments and societal groups to assert specific social orders, meanings and identities (Rowlands and Tilley 2006). As much as the urban space, however, they are not just surfaces where the macro powers materialise themselves but are co-created with the citizens, who rewrite their meanings, and sometimes – confront them. Arguing that the destruction of monuments is not a random act of vandalism, but an intentional aim to eradicate the symbolic “icon”, Gambioni (1997) proposes the idea that targeting public space monuments is a form of “political iconoclasm”, which serves as a method to confront the downfall of political regimes. Similarly, Frank and Ristic (2020) introduce the idea of "urban fallism" to investigate how this global removal of monuments acts as a means of asserting the right to the city (Lefebvre 1996 [1968]), challenges symbols that uphold oppression and, in turn, reshaping urban environments into more socially just spaces. They contend that the removal or alteration of monuments goes beyond a mere confrontation with the past, serving as a means to question the current state of affairs. Drawing on these concepts, we can discern analogous effects in the processes of re-imagining not only Bulgaria’s past, but also working out the country’s present geopolitical matters.

Hence, although the dismantling of the monument reminds of the post-socialist iconoclasm, it is slightly different. As K. Verdery puts it, "tearing down and erecting statues goes on all over the world, in times past as well as present; there is nothing specifically postsocialist about it" (Verdery 1999: 6).

Thinking Post-Socialism Spatially

The process of dismantling the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia, prompted by the recent war in Ukraine, and the continuing new wave of anti-communism 35 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, therefore, can be a chance to critically approach the old academic debate about "post-socialism".

Ethnographic research has widely criticised post-socialist theory for understanding societies as homogenous, as well as for the teleological, Western-influenced idea of "transition" as a process that would eventually lead to a capitalist market economy and democracy (Hörschelmann and Stenning 2008). Meanwhile, several scholars have argued that the idea of the "post-socialist city" has become less relevant (for example Bodnar 2001; Chari & Verdery 2009; Hirt 2013). However, as Kaneff (2022: 211) points out, although social scientists are critical regarding the appropriateness of such concepts, people still use the temporal distinction between socialism and post-socialism to organise time. This is the case in Bulgaria as well, where the "zombie" of the past (Chelsea & Druta 2006) is an important part of the discourse about the demolition of the Monument to the Soviet Army imagined as Bulgaria's "Berlin Wall", whose destruction would eventually lead to the long-awaited establishment of "democracy" and "normality". Therefore, theoretical questions arise, concerning the potential usefulness of the concept of "post-socialism". Drawing from this affective emic metaphor and putting it into dialogue with Lefebvre's ideas about the need to establish a new space, to fully realise a specific type of society, one might ask: How is

"transition" worked out through space? Would the dismantling of the Monument be the official end of "post-socialism"? And most interestingly, what comes after post-socialism? Engaging with these questions, in Chapter 2 I will illustrate how the metaphor of the wall mirrors a specific type of progress-based mindset I call "standby transition", characterised by the perception of "transition" as not yet finished and the simultaneous anticipating for a better future, often linked with the imagined "West".

Methodology, Scales, Ethnographic Material

The research is built on a mixed-methods qualitative approach, chosen for its suitability for scrutinising the complexity of meanings, motives, aspirations, beliefs, values and attitudes from an emic perspective (Maxwell 2013). It is based on ethnographic fieldwork, and discursive, archival and visual analysis, conducted in different periods before, during and after the process of the dismantling of the Monument to the Soviet Army in December 2023. The ethnographic material is grounded on observations of key events, the space around the Monument and other related places in Sofia, 20 in-depth interviews[8] with 24 people engaged in the debates surrounding the memorial, and numerous casual conversations. Most of my interviews were conducted in April 2024, with previous more structured observations during August and December 2023. I also draw on my long-term observations of the field, being a citizen of Sofia for more than 20 years.

As the methodological approach of this thesis draws directly upon my dialectical Lefebvrian framework, I am looking at the spatial imaginaries related to the Monument to the Soviet Army both on micro and macro scales, trying to grasp what Lefebvre calls representational Space (how is space lived and imagined, what are the meanings and discourses about it that people construct), and its tensions with the Spatial Practice (the bottom-up construction and usage of space by the

[8] My interviews continued between one and three hours, with approximate length of 1 h and 22 minutes.

people; e.g. usage of the Monument for resistance) and the Representation of Space (top-down construction of space by organisational structures; e.g. maps and plans of the space, official narratives) (1991:38-39). In this sense, I follow his understanding of urban space as an "oeuvre" mediated by "the near order" (citizens and the relation between them) and "the far order" (organisational structures) (Lefebvre 1996: 113).

On the micro level, I was following the actions of key participants in the debates surrounding the Monument. I conducted interviews with members of the Civic Initiative for the Dismantling of the Monument to the Soviet Army[9], participants of different nationalist organisations, engaged in the debates, including the Bulgarian National Union, participants of the "We Want Bulgarian Monument" movement, and others. On the other hand, I spoke with representatives of the broad network of actors and groups protesting against the dismantling of the Monument, like the newly formed association "The Guardians of the Memory", sympathisers and participants of parties like The Bulgarian Socialist Party, Vazrazhdane and Levitsata, representatives of the Anti-Fascist Union, and supporters of communist movements like the Marxist-Leninist movement "23 September". On the more macro level, I conducted interviews with several state-affiliated actors, such as representatives from Sofia Municipality and City Council, as well as politicians from other parties like "Democratic Bulgaria". However, the lines between these scales were often ambiguous, as some of the activists were also politicians[10].

Following Mannheim (2016 [1964]: 188), it is also important to frame the respondents with their "generational experience". The participants of the Initiative can be separated into two groups: 1)

[9] It is one of the longest-running group of activist fighting for the removal of the Monument since 2010. From now on: "CIDMSA", "the Initiative" or "the Civic Initiative".
[10] A lot of the people I spoke to emphasized that they do not want to be anonymous, so I have kept their real names. In other cases, I have used fictitious names.

40 to 50 years-old people, the generation that met the "Changes" of 1989 in their teenage years, a lot of whom later became key actors of the 2013 middle-class led protests in Bulgaria (see Tsoneva 2019); 2) 60 to 70-year-old age group, that could be identified as the generation of the 90's protests for "democratisation". The participants of different nationalist organisations were predominantly young males in ages of 16 to 35. Regarding the wide range of defenders of the Monument, besides the stereotypical image of the elderly "nostalgic" people, one could find people from different age groups, among which I even struck up a conversation with high school students.

I also had a chance to observe organised events that these groups were engaged in – protests in support of Ukraine, starting after the full-scale invasion on 24th February 2022, the protest camp of August 2023 in front of the Monument against the plans for its dismantling, the attack of the Monument later the same month, 16th of April 2024, marking the commemoration of the victims of the "Sveta Nedelya" terrorist attack by the Communist party in 1925 (see Chapter 2), and 9th of May, also known as Victory Day (see Chapter 3).

To provide historical depth to the study, archival materials related to the Monument and Sofia's urban development have been examined. This approach enriched my comprehension of how the historical narratives around the past and Bulgaria's relations with the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union were shaped.

At the same time, throughout my whole fieldwork, I was accompanying my observations with audiovisual material collected by camera. Even though at first I had planned to use it mostly as a mnemonic device for visual "field notes" (Razsa 2014: 505), it turned out to be more than that – often shaping my perspective, allowing me to be more careful about certain details and visual changes of the field, and also sometimes functioning as a sort of a "gatekeeper" (Snyder 1976) that would help me approach new interlocutors.

Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is organised in three chapters, following the different clusters of temporal-spatial restructurings. The first chapter is devoted to the past and its current negotiation, prompted by the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24.02.2022. Looking at the history and fate of the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia before and after 1989, it analyses how its erection and subsequent contestation reflect the construction of the "brotherly help" and "double liberation" narrative that characterised Bulgarian-Russian relationships, and its following disturbance, culminating with the recent war in Ukraine. The second chapter is devoted to the affective emic metaphor of the Monument to the Soviet Army as a "Bulgarian Berlin Wall", discussing the discursive "ghost" of socialism that still haunts the present against the backdrop of state-led neoliberal policies. It explores the awkward current state of "incompleteness" of the process of the dismantling of the Monument and how it mirrors the spatial thinking of the "transition", viewed, much like the dismantlement, as "unfinished". In this sense, the chapter brings back to the table the old theoretical discussions around the term "post-socialism", looking at emic understandings of notions like "transition", "democracy", "good life", "communism" and "fascism", widely used by my interlocutors. The third and final chapter is oriented to the future, illustrating how the pedestal, once holding the Soviet Army Soldier, has turned into a territory for imagining the "future path" of the country, and analysing how the different clusters of spatial arguments reflect different speculations about "Bulgarianness" and "Europeanness"

Chapter 1. The Past Cut into Pieces: From "Liberation" to "Occupation"

"I do not know of any other country in the world in which a people's love and gratitude to another people is embodied in so many monuments as it is in Bulgaria. Here every park, every mound, and every handful of earth witnesses the limitless love and gratitude of the Bulgarian people to the liberators."

– V. Kolarov (1951)

"No people will allow and accept such nonsense – to tolerate monuments in praise of their enslavers."

– L. Dalchev (1993)

The spectacle-like dismantling of the Monument to the Soviet Army against the hum of a cutting flex continued over the days before Christmas 2023, evolving into the most discussed topic across media. Instead of engaging in last-minute preparation for the holidays, every day from early morning to dusk, different groups of people would pass near the metal construction fences in Knyazheska Garden to observe the dramatic cutting of the figures on the top of the plinth. After the soldier's hand with his machine gun was cut down in the dark hours of 12 December, over the next days the same fate followed his head and torso. Not long after, the body parts of his comrades

– the Bulgarian mother with her child and the worker, accompanied him back on the ground, right to the soon-to-be empty plinth[11].

The cut parts of the bronze figures, left on the right bottom of the empty plinth. December 2023

Spending time around the site in the subsequent days, I chatted with diverse people, both newcomers and returning observers, excited to see the dismantling with their own eyes. On one of the final days of the topping down of the bronze figures, as I captured images in the early afternoon and waited for the crane's movement of the cut parts from the monument (usually occurring once or twice daily), I struck up a conversation with a man – an icon painter in his late 50s returning from work with a bag in his hands. Inquiring why he was there and whether he had been present

[11] Despite the criticism of the way the procedure of the dismantling was held, the Regional Administration explained that due to the massive weight of the figures, they needed to be cut, for the Monument to be preserved, according to the approved "Health and Safety Plan". (Stefanova 2023, Regional Administration Sofia 2023)

on the first day of the events, he replied, *"No, this is my first day here. I intended to come in the last few days, but work held me back. I've been here for the last two hours. It's cold, and I need to go home, but I can't afford to miss this. I've waited for it my entire life — for Sofia to wake up without the Shpagin of the Russian Occupier menacingly towering over us. To feel free!"*

How did the soldier from the Monument, dedicated to the "Soviet Army Liberator" as its inscription stated, become seen as an "occupier"? What led to the dismantling of the Monument to the Soviet Army, and what political shifts did it reflect? To understand this, we need to delve into the history of the monument and its fate after 1989.

People observing the dismantling of the Monument. December 2023

"Brotherly Peoples" and the "Double Liberation": Construction of the Monument to the Soviet Army (1954)

"[T]he monument should bear the specificity of our attitude to the Soviet Union, to our history at the moment when we are building it, there should be serenity, youth, friendship, delight – all this should be present in it. These are things qualitatively different from other Soviet monuments erected to thank the Soviet Army. […] Because our relations are also qualitatively different. The Soviet army liberated many nations. But our people were liberated differently. [...] Therefore, the monument should be a monument to friendship, a monument to youth, a monument to the Bulgarian-Soviet friendship." (Committee on Science, Arts and Culture 11.02.1954: 61-62)

This fragment from a discussion by the "Commission for Reviewing the Creative Work Performed by the Author's Collective for the Construction of the Monument to the Soviet Army" clearly illustrates the meanings and functions of the memorial to be erected in 1954. The future site was seen as one that would "tell the story to the generations" (Zidarov 1953) – an epic story of "liberation", "brotherly love" between two nations, and "gratitude and loyalty of our people to the Soviet Union" (ibid). A monument not for the past, but for the future.

As Stanoeva outlines, a key aspect of the construction of the socialist city after 1944 is the monumentalisation of space, "in which the political is anchored in the city" (2016: 12), connected "much more closely with the construction of the future than with the memory of the past" (ibid:13). Continuing this future-oriented vision, the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia belonged to a specific war memorial genre, multiplied in a series of similar memorials in Eastern and Central Europe, erected after the Second World War (Aman 1992: 37). Unveiled to celebrate the "liberating mission" of the Soviet Union against fascism (Vukov 2006: 267), they were often constructed by

the victorious army, “which itself redefined its presence as an occupier in a liberation action” (Stanoeva 2016: 56).

However, as seen from the archival vignette above, the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia was seen as “different” from other similar monuments. As Nikolai Vukov illustrates, the elaboration of the “brotherly help” narrative that surrounded these monuments in Bulgaria followed alternative logic (2006: 269). Besides demonstrating the “eternal friendship” between Bulgaria and the Soviet Union, the line of their interpretation was built on the discourse of a “second” or “double liberation”, where the Red Army's arrival in Bulgaria in September 1944[12] was framed by historiography within the already existing idiom of "liberation", related to the arrival of Russian troops during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878. Thus, after 1944 the commemoration of the Red Army in the country found a well-established interpretative pattern of monumental expression to the Soviet soldiers’ “predecessors”. Monuments to the Soviet Army were customarily built in proximity to monuments of the Russian-Turkish War, with some of them explicitly dedicated to “those to whom we owe our freedom twice” (ibid: 275).

The Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia was planned to be the largest among a series of memorials erected in the late 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s. It was officially opened on 9 September 1954 for Bulgaria's national day back then and the tenth anniversary of the “liberation”. Positioned in the heart of Knyazheska Garden, it was part of a large memorial complex with alleys, dominated by an eight-metre bronze composition, atop a 27-metre granite plinth. On it 37 meters above the ground the Soviet Army Soldier was triumphantly wielding a PPSh-41 Shpagin machine pistol, popular among Soviet soldiers during World War II. Standing out front, he was followed by

[12] Until 1946, it was called the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army, and then it was renamed the Soviet Army. However, I will use mostly “the Soviet Army” in the text, following the narrative of the Monument.

Bulgarian fighters – a mother with her child and a worker. The large rectangular base of the plinth also depicts bronze reliefs of the October Revolution and the final battles of the "The Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union" (1944-45). At the bottom of the pedestal, the inscription reads: “To the Soviet Army Liberator from the Grateful Bulgarian People”.

Construction of the Monument, 1954 Source: BTA

The “Changes”

During the dismantlement process in 2023 the whole park was surrounded by scaffoldings and in the windier days the space echoed with the rattling of metal sheets. Although the garden looked like a construction field, this awkwardness gave it a new kind of liveliness. Along the fences, the few spots opening a view of the crane’s movement soon turned into agora-like spaces, where crowds would gather to observe.

One day, during my routine casual participation in such an informal gathering, a young man with a distinctive accent approached me and my interlocutor, inquiring about what everybody was looking at.

"Don’t you know?” we responded, taken aback that he had not heard the most discussed topic in the country. *“They are dismantling the Monument to the Soviet Army...”*

"I'm not from here," he gave us a confused look, indirectly explaining his unfamiliar accent. *"I'm from the Czech Republic".*

"Oh, well, you Czechs removed most of your monuments in the '90s. We are doing it just now," the architect, who I was discussing with, retorted.

"But why now?", the young Czech man continued, still confused. A long moment of silence followed. My interlocutor and I exchanged glances; we knew it was going to be a lengthy conversation…

In the decades following the 1989 socio-economic changes in Eastern Europe, as part of the broader endeavour of societies to reshape their identities, there was an attempt to rework the material worlds they live in (Yampolski 1995). This resulted in a massive change of street names, the destruction of old symbols, and the toppling of statues all over the former Eastern Bloc in the first months after the fall of the Berlin Wall (Forest 2011, Vukov 2009). However, not all countries underwent the same process of smooth and linear re-organisation of public space. In Czechoslovakia (after 1992 Czech Republic), where the surprised passerby was from, one of the most far-reaching sets of "post-socialist cleansing" (Verdery 2012: 64) policy measures were adopted by the authorities right after 1990. In this context immediately after the Velvet Revolution in 1989, public spaces in Prague and across the country witnessed numerous acts of "de-commemoration" (Pauknerova & Gibas 2021)[13].

Bulgaria is among the countries, in which this process was not evenly implemented. Among the reasons for this was the different constitution of the "brotherly help" discourse that characterized

[13] Despite the initial harsh decommunisation policies implemented after 1989, the Czech Republic still perceived some anti-fascist monuments from this period. Among them was the statue of Marshal Konev in Prague, which nevertheless in 2020 was removed by the pro-European and liberal-conservative party TOP 09 (see Vrba 2020; Pauknerova & Gibas 2021).

Bulgaria's relations with the Soviet Union, the co-existence of "many versions of the past" (Koleva 2020: 12; 2022) and – because the material traces of the past were treated differently by each government. Therefore, to comprehend the transformation of public spaces in Bulgaria, it is essential to delve into the political history of the '90s, a period known as the "Changes" ("Promenite").

While often considered "the end of the communist regime" in Bulgaria[14], the *palace coup d'état* on November 10, 1989, merely marks the beginning of a long series of confrontations between the two parties rotating in power during the '90s – the political successor of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP), renamed Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), and the newly formed anti-communist Union of the Democratic Forces (UDF)[15]. In this context of a gradual transformation of the political and economic system (Crampton 2007: 384-421), handling the socialist heritage was one of the many aspects of the political conflict between the BCP and the UDF. While the first was trying to use heritage to preserve their power, resisting addressing issues such as the participation of Bulgaria in NATO or EU, UDF's main goal was to break all links with the socialist period.

Post-November 10, public anger against the symbols of the past escalated after a new cabinet was formed, led by BCP leaders Peter Mladenov and Andrey Lukanov (Crampton 2007: 390). A series of protests led to round table talks with UDF, resulting in Bulgaria's first democratic elections in 45 years on June 10, 1990 (ibid: 392-395). Despite the strong anti-communist public attitude, the BCP won, leading to new public tension. Amidst the heated atmosphere, on August 26, 1990, the

[14] Daniela Koleva has emphasised the need to clarify the "obvious terminological discrepancy" in the simultaneous use of the terms "communism" and "socialism" (2020: 22-23). As she writes, while "communism" refers to the so-called "totalitarian" paradigm associated with the works of Hannah Arendt and is often used by political scientists, the term "socialism" is more related to anthropological studies, whose interest is directed to the social aspects of the studied problems. In the present text, I would mainly use "socialism", but I will also follow the sources and emic terminologies, which I work with.

[15] The main right-wing political force during the first decade of the transition period.

building of the Party House of BCP was set on fire, leading to Mladenov's resignation and UFO leader Zhelyo Zhelev's replacement. In this context, an expert cabinet voted on a new constitution (National Assembly 1991) and began a slow process of “decommunisation” of the public space in the capital (Ivanov 2011: 444). With the subsequent victory of the UDF, removing the symbols of communism in the capital and other parts of the country continued (Vukov 2006: 284).

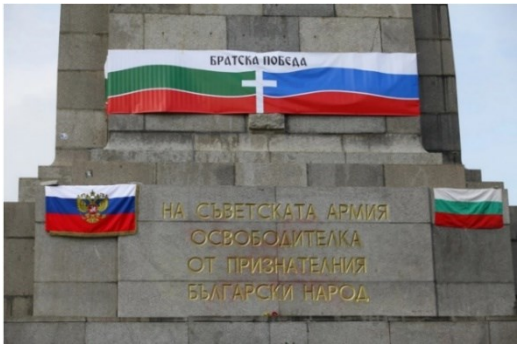
However, many monuments, especially to the Soviet Army, remained intact (Vukov 2021: 68). In 1992 President Zheliyo Zhelev signed the Agreement for Friendship and Cooperation between Bulgaria and the Russian Federation (National Assembly 1992) and the Russian government often protested against “the disrespect of Russian cultural heritage in Bulgaria”. Thus, except for the ones in Pleven and Yambol, the other representations of this type have been left in limbo and until today continue to stimulate public reactions (Vukov 2021: 68).

The Fate of the Soviet Soldier After 1989

After the Soviet Soldier’s hand and torso were cut, his dismembered body was left at the bottom right of the plinth, allowing many to see him close for the first time. The newfound proximity of his face provoked passersby’s curiosity and made them wonder about the story behind it. Who was the soldier with the Shpagin*? “A son of an "unreliable" father –an elite lawyer of the royal court of King Boris”, “an intelligent, graduated in philosophy man, repressed by communists, who was not allowed to work,”* were among the many stories circulating in media about the prototype of the gun-wielding partisan hero from the memorial (for example Angelova 2023). Bai Vasil, as his name appeared to be, had turned out to be a man “restricted by the regime”, forced to search for alternative ways of making a living by posing for the artists of the Academy of Fine Arts. How did after 70 years, the “brotherly” soviet soldier become a “repressed” Bulgarian?

The political shifts of 1989 instigated a substantial transformation in the “double liberation” narrative that characterised the Bulgarian-Soviet relations. In official historiography, against the backdrop of establishing a new generation of anti-communist academics, the role of the Soviet Army in the victory over fascism was strongly downplayed, with claims that there was “never” such a regime in Bulgaria (see for example Bulgarian Academy of Sciences 2023). In this new narrative such monuments came to be seen as embodiments of "adulation to the enslaver, fanaticism, and oppression" (Vek 21 1993, as cited in Vukov 2006: 283). From a “liberator”, the Soviet soldier had turned into an “occupier”.

Amidst the evolving anti-communist sentiments, the first attempt to dismantle the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia came in 1993, when the Municipal Council entrusted the UDF mayor of the capital Alexander Yanchulev to carry out the necessary procedures. In April the preparations were made by erecting scaffolding around the monument. However, in the following days, the mayor unexpectedly informed Prime Minister Lyuben Berov in a letter that, despite the plan, the work was stopped due to a verbal order from the Interior minister, Viktor Mihailov, known for his pro-Russian sympathies (Todorov 2013: 186-190).

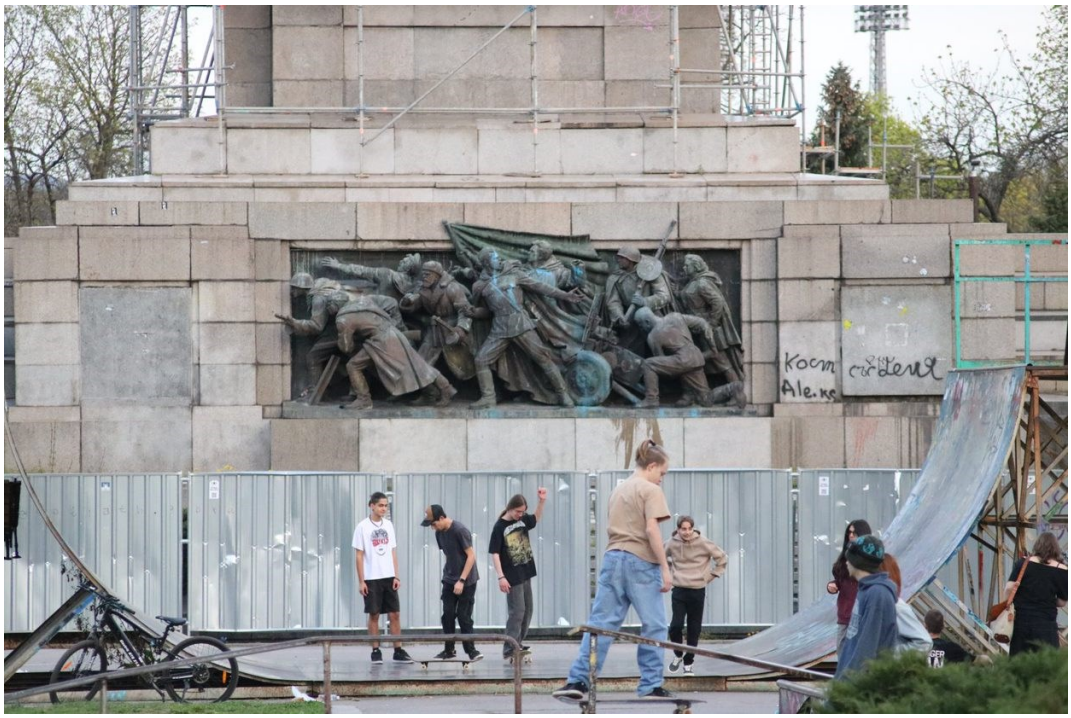


Russian and Bulgarian flags displayed on the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia, 9 May 2014 (Ladislav Tsvetkov, bTV News, in: Stanchev 2023:505)

Thus, even though the “brotherly peoples” narrative started gradually falling apart after 1989 (Vukov 2006: 283), during the transition the nationalist discourses in the country continued to be

constructed under the influence of the Russian Federation (Stanchev 2023). The rhetoric of "eternal brotherhood" persisted, but it was now framed in terms of new connections: Eastern Orthodoxy, Slavic identity, and the "common cultural code" between the two nations (ibid: 503).

In the next years, despite diplomatic tensions, the economic crises diverted attention away from the Monument's fate. Ironically the whole memorial complex became a part of the new life that was shaping in Knyazheska Garden after 1989, where new generations, such as skaters and bikers, and contemporary civic initiatives like the LGBT pride and Sofia Graffiti festival were taking place, converting it into an anti-monumental place of "freedom, alternative lifestyles, and anti-consumerism" (Dimitrova 2016).



The skaters, among the "permanent residents" of Knyazheska Garden, continued using the ramp during the dismantlement process. April 2024.

Civic Initiative for the Dismantling of the Monument to the Soviet Army: The Monument as a Territory for Political Claim-Making

"I did it somewhere about a year or two after I had researched my grandfather's file who was in Belene [a labour camp in socialist Bulgaria – note by the author]. *I went to the commission, asked for the documents, read, studied the family history and lived a tough personal moment learning about my grandfather's life and fate, which had shaken me up. At this moment the urge to do something about MORA[16] struck me".*

This is how Valentina Marinova, a psychotherapist at the beginning of her 50s, explained her initial motivation to start the Civic Initiative for dismantling of the Monument to the Soviet Army, which she created in 2010. At this moment Bulgaria had already been accepted to NATO and the European Union, respectively in 2004 and 2007. Meanwhile, at the beginning of the new age, decommunisation continued in full force. In 2000 a law declaring the communist regime and its leaders as criminal was passed (National Assembly 2000), together with the first lustration law, allowing for part of the State Security files to be opened (National Assembly 2001)[17]. This wave of newly revealed information about the repressions in the country in the period between 1944 and 1989 led to the strengthening of anti-communist sentiments, which often like in Valentina's case were related to personal and family stories.

At the beginning of April 2024, we met in her cabinet in Sofia. I couldn't help but notice how close it was positioned to the office of the Bulgarian Socialist Party. This was the same party in charge when Valentina got inspired to start a campaign against the Monument in 2009. It was amidst the

[16] MORA (In Bulgarian pronounced as MOCHA) is a derogatory abbreviation that people protesting against the Monument often use. It goes for "The Monument to the Occupying Red Army".
[17] Although the next ruling party, the National Movement for Stability and Progress with its leader Simeon (II) Saxe-Coburg Gotha, also promised pro-EU policies, it surprisingly repealed the lustration law passed by Kostov, substantiating speculations on Russian sympathies.

beginning of a long series of anti-government protests in Bulgaria that culminated in 2013 when BSP was in charge again. At this moment during the post-2008 global protest wave, Facebook had become a key instrument in social mobilisation (Georgieva 2017: 101). Similarly, a year before the official beginning of the Initiative in 2010, Valentina impulsively created a Facebook event she called "Dismantlement of the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia". The spontaneous protest attracted the attention of many sympathisers and in the days that followed, various known Bulgarian anti-communist intellectuals and activists began contacting Valentina. After a series of meetings with them, what would eventually become the Civic Initiative for the Dismantling of the Monument to the Soviet Army took shape.

Throughout the years their main goal has been for the Monument to be moved to the Museum of Socialist Art in Bulgaria, in their words, as an example of "totalitarian art", depicting the "cruel terror over the Bulgarian people, which began after the occupation of the country by the USSR" (CIDMSA Declaration, n.d)[18]. Their actions – among which archival research, campaign leading, event organisations, and legal actions, have been shared with the public through their website[19] and Facebook group[20]. The first event of the initiative was held on 10 November 2010, devoted to the 21st anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall[21], which throughout the years came to be an important temporal and spatial reference for geopolitical imagination, and the binary quest for "democracy"

[18] The Initiative has been horizontally led by different liberal anti-communist intellectuals, academics, journalists and musicians and was widely supported by several centre-right political parties – Ivan Kostov's Democrats for Strong Bulgaria (DSB), the Bulgarian Social Democratic Party, and later Democratic Bulgaria Coalition, "We Continue the change", and Vili Lilkov's new right-wing local coalition "Blue Sofia".
[19] Demontirane.org, and later https://decommunization.wordpress.com/
[20] There are currently over 9.6 K participants in the Facebook group of the Initiative: https://www.facebook.com/groups/.
[21] Here one can find photo albums with all their events: https://www.facebook.com/groups/173057249461386/media/albums.

against “communism”. Its symbolism was directly transferred to the Monument, seen as “Our Berlin Wall” (see Chapter 2).

Over the next years, the Initiative organised numerous events. In 2011 around the anniversary of the October Revolution, the word “liberator” from the plaque was put in quotation marks. On 17 June 2012, the Monument was wrapped in the European and Bulgarian flags, commemorating the Berlin uprising of June 17, 1953, in GDR. In the same year a few days before the 9 May celebrations (Victory Day) the inscription was sprayed with the Bulgarian flag.

"Our Berlin Wall". Valentina Marinova’s archive

Wrapping the monument with the Bulgarian and European flags, 2012. Picture by Nina Deneva

At the same time, in 2013, the anti-governmental protests against the BSP-led coalition of Oresharski were about to reach a peak. Although the country had already established democratic institutions, the middle-class-led "ДАНС-withme" protests became known for their anti-communist rhetoric (Tsoneva 2019). The Monument became a canvas for the protesters' political claims, directly channelling the anti-communist repertoire.

In other cases, it was also used as a canvas for anti-military protest as an answer to events outside the country. On 23 February 2014 shortly before the annexation of Crimea, the central figure of the "Great Patriotic War" facade was spray-painted in the colours of the Ukrainian flag. This act was not merely an expression of solidarity but also played a rhetorical function within the local political claim-making, instrumental in shaping political discourse in the country.

Despite these numerous artistic performances and protests, however, the Soviet Soldier continued his life in the centre of the city for a long time. At least until 2022.

2014. Picture by Nina Deneva

"Putin Did Us a Favour": An "Eternal Brotherhood" Coming to an End

"What happened with the events in Ukraine, the brutal Russian aggression unleashed such a strong energy... Actually, you could say, it's very, very ironic, but Vladimir Putin did us a favour. I mean, to our initiative, in particular. […] The masks just fell off and people saw that […] Russia is a terribly backward country".

This is how Kuber Saparov, a long-term activist and currently the chairman of CIDMSA, described the post-2022 situation in Bulgaria when we met in April 2024 under the already empty plinth of the Monument to the Soviet Army.

The dismantling of the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia. December 2023.

More than two years ago, on the day of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, protesters had gathered in front of the Monument with European and Ukrainian flags. Over the next few days, the Soviet soldier often woke up to cries of "Russian occupiers out of Bulgaria!", "This is not Moscow" and "Long live Ukraine".

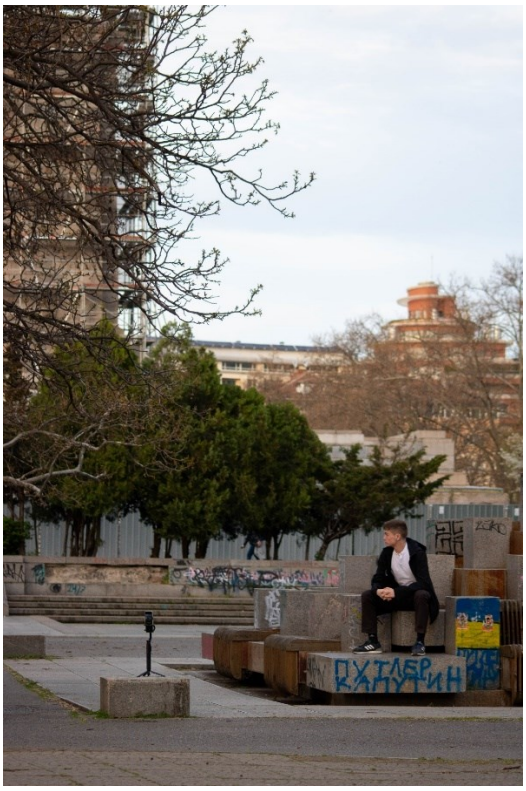
As in other countries in Europe[22], in Bulgaria, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 prompted new waves of rage against the Soviet heritage in public spaces, due to the direct associations between Russia and the Soviet Union. These events also became an important part of the local political scene, reinforcing the discourse about the "Russian Occupation" of Bulgaria at the end of WWII and provoking renewed debates about the country's diplomatic relationships with Russia.

[22] In 2022 Soviet statues in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, that were not dismantled in previous waves of de-communisation of public space, had similar fates as the Monument in Sofia (Alwsat 2022).

Trash bins around the Monument painted with Ukrainian and Russian flags. April 2024.

Bringing additional disturbance in the "double liberation" narrative, that had been part of the national identity building, the war also promoted the more active involvement of nationalist groups in the debates around the monument. Thus, on the 9 of May 2023, except for the Russian Flags and communist symbolics in which the Monument is traditionally coloured on this day, one could see a palette of Bulgarian flags. Next to the usual anti-monument group of the liberals, were standing the participants from the newly shaped movement "We Want a Bulgarian Monument", organised by different nationalist organisations.

9 May 2023. Picture: Svobodna Evropa



"Putler Kaputin". April 2024.

However, it was not only citizens instrumentalising external shocks in the local political scene. Just one day after the full-scale invasion Traycho Traykov, the mayor of the Sredets region within the pro-European coalition of "Democratic Bulgaria" and "We continue the change", was the first to open the topic, announcing his intent to initiate the process of dismantling of the Monument. Following this, on March 9, 2023, the Sofia city council passed a resolution instructing Mayor Yordanka Fandukova to request the state's assistance in relocating the memorial. This sequence of events culminated on August 2 when Bulgaria's pro-European government, which assumed office

in June, officially altered the status of the state-owned property housing the monument, paving the way for the city council to proceed with the monument's removal[23].

Before the dismantling started in December 2023, a huge banner depicting "Bulgaria's European Path" covered the Monument. Put by the Regional Administration (which now owned the monument), it illustrated a tree with key national history events listed on its trunk and branches, finishing at the top with Bulgaria's current goals – admission to Schengen and the Eurozone. Nevertheless, these were not only discussions about Bulgaria's goal as a member of the European Union's zones but rather encompassing old "civilisational" debates concerning positionings between the "West" imagined as a "place of freedom" and the "East of Putin" now seen a "place of suppressed human rights", as my interlocutors put it.

"Bulgaria's European path". September 20023. Picture by Boulevard Bulgaria

[23] In the beginning of August 2023, a government decision changed the status of the memorial complex from public state property to private state property. This move was seen as legally facilitating the dismantlement process (The Sofia Globe 2023). The decision was proposed by the district governor of Sofia, Vyara Todeva, appointed to the post a few weeks after Bulgaria's pro-Western government took office.

Winding up, although discussions regarding the future of the Soviet Army monument had persisted for years, the dismantlement only became feasible now, catalysed by the external shock of the war in Ukraine. Drawing on the idea of the continuation between the Soviet Union and the contemporary Russian Federation, the culmination of ongoing aggression over Ukraine's sovereignty was instrumentalised in the reframing of the "double liberation" narrative surrounding the Soviet Army's arrival in Bulgaria no longer seen as "liberators", but as "invaders", "violating national dignity". This reinterpretation not only marked a peak in the post-1989 disturbance of the ideas of the "eternal brotherhood" but also sparked new waves of discussions about the country's "civilisational" belonging, where the solidarity with Ukraine was mobilised as a crucial instrument for different political claims-makings regarding the county's geopolitical orientation. Hence, even though this dismantling (still unfinished) reminds of the post-socialist iconoclasm, as Verdery would put it, "there is nothing post-socialist about it" (Verdery 1999:6). In the next chapters I'm going to discuss how it can rather be a chance to critically rethink post-socialism as a concept.

Chapter 2. The Present Stuck in the "Post-": Thinking "Transition" spatially

"A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of communism."

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party" (2016 [1848])

"Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes."

Estragon, "Waiting for Godot" by Samuel Beckett (1954)

Going away step by step. December 2023.

"The Bulgarian Berlin Wall is going away step by step. There is no longer a Soviet automatic weapon sticking out over the heads of the people of Sofia, and soon there will be no more servile, vassal attitude that the communist regime instilled in the Bulgarians".

The above words can easily be mistaken as describing events that took shape in the stormy period after 1989's November 10. However, they were written at the end of 2023 by the Bulgarian blogger Asen Genov, to describe the events taking place in Sofia's Knyazheska Garden, when a crane menacingly hung over the Monument to the Soviet Army.

Although more than three decades have transpired since the fall of the (actual) Berin wall, as various scholars have demonstrated (Chelsea and Druta 2016, Kofti 2016, Gallinat 2022), anti-communism remains deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness in the countries from the ex-Eastern Bloc. Why were people in Bulgaria still talking about a "transition" and "communism", when social scientists had declared that "there is nothing to transit any more" (Muller 2019)? How are emic understandings of such notions implemented in the political scene? How is "post-socialism" constructed by local communities and what is the role of space when thinking about it?

Looking at some recent theoretical discussions around the concept of post-socialism, and how it fits the Bulgarian context, this chapter will shed more light on the emic understandings of "transition" and the role of space when thinking about it. By illustrating how notions such as "communism," "democracy", and "fascism," widely used by my interlocutors, are employed to mobilise specific political claims, I will outline some of the potential usefulness in the contemporary inquiry of post-socialism. More specifically, I will illustrate how the emic metaphor of the Monument to the Soviet Army as a "Bulgarian Berlin Wall" mirrors a specific type of teleological thinking I call "standby transition"– on the one side, characterised by what is imagined as a "never-ending transition", where the "spectre of communism" has transformed into a zombie

discourse (Chelsea and Druta 2016), and on the other side, by what can be described as an "Estragonian" waiting for the arrival for the better future[24].

From "Post-" to Ghost-Socialism

The term "post-socialism" emerged as an overarching concept employed by social scientists to capture the diverse and often tumultuous transformations following the collapse of socialist regimes over the past 35 years (Gallinat 2022b; Bohle and Greskovits 2012). Nevertheless, throughout this period and amid the official declaration of "the end of the transition" (Chelsea and Druta 2016; Muller 2019), many scholars have questioned the appropriateness of notions like "transition" and "post-socialism" (Hann 2006, Thelen 2011, Muller 2019). The terms have been mainly criticised for their teleological presumption that post-socialist countries need to undertake a linear transformation from a seemingly obsolete economic structure to an advanced neoliberal democracy (Verdery 1996, Hörschelmann and Stenning 2008). In this line of thought, post-socialism has been characterised as an Orientalising intellectual construct and developmentalist project imposed by Western scholars based on the assumed economic and political superiority (Cervnikova 2012; Muller 2019), hindering a genuine understanding of the true "otherness" of post-socialist societies (Thelen 2011).

Despite this important criticism, a growing body of literature in the past years has illustrated alternative aspects of the validity of the notion. Proposing reframing the anthropology of post-socialism as Cold War studies, Cheri and Verdery (2009) for example, argue that exploring representations of the "West" and the mechanisms shaping those images in colonial and socialist contexts is crucial to countering Western constructions of Eastern Europe as the European "Other" (c.f. Hann 2014). As Kaneff (2022) also points out, although anthropologists are critical when it

[24] Inspired by Becket's character Estragon in his play "Waiting for Godot".

comes to the relevance of the concepts of "post-socialism" and "transition", people still use such temporal distinction to organise what was "before" and what came "after" 1989 (ibid: 108). Therefore, looking at their emic dimensions is crucial.

Moreover, even though the "actually existing socialism" as a horizon of political experience has become less relevant, scholars have illustrated how its "ghost" is instrumentalised for political claim-making in the present. Chelcea and Druţa (2016) propose that the alternative term "zombie socialism" can help us understand the newly formed capitalisms, and more specifically how this phenomenon has made some of these countries "more capitalist" than countries with longer capitalist traditions in Europe. Building on Simonica's ideas that "capitalism is not only built with the ruins [of socialism] but also by keeping its ghost alive" (Simonica 2012, as cited in Chelsea and Druta 2016: 525), they propose that one way to analyse the enduring effects of socialism is by examining how the "winners of transition" (the economic and political elites in Central and Eastern Europe) continue to utilise the memory of state socialism as a disciplinary tool, portraying socialism as the ultimate evil. Therefore, they illustrate how the "ghost" of the "past" is mobilised in the present as a discursive tool used to further consolidate neoliberal hegemony in post-socialist societies, dismissing the social claims made by the "losers" of transition as being "communist, outdated, anti-democratic" (ibid: 526).

Similarly, in a more recent edition Kaneff (2022), among others (Ringel 2022, Dorondel 2022, Gallinat 2022 etc.), have argued for a temporal and spatial extension of the term, to grasp both the way such discourses are utilised outside the "traditional" field of Eastern Europe, and further reflecting on how the "remnants" of the past continue to be a significant feature of the present and future, and therefore to reproduce epistemological Cold War global hierarchies (Kaneff 2022: 210-211). Gallinat for example proposes the term "actually existing post-socialism" to scrutinise how

policy-makers treat East Germans as stuck in the transition, and their expectations that such attitudes and behaviours must and will be overcome through the completion of the democratic-capitalist transition (Gallinat 2022: 156).

Building on this recent body of literature, I argue that to understand why people themselves keep using such metaphors as the "Bulgarian Berlin Wall" depicting the continuing influence of "the spectre of communism", we should see how the notions of "socialism"/"communism" operate within public discourse. As scholars have illustrated, they can function both as "a tool of governance" used by elites to solidify authorities (Kuljic 2006: 9, as cited in Junes and Iliev 2023) and among the local population, which can internalise, reproduce and instrumentalise such discourses in very different and unexpected ways (cf. Kofti 2016).

In (s)Pace with the Times: "Communism in the Mindset" and Other Emic Theories about "Transition" in Bulgaria

One early April morning in 2024 Q. and I were sitting next to the skate ramp, looking at the "Great Patriotic War" facade, on the western bottom of the empty plinth – still there, visible above the metal fences. This was the same facade that he and his friends from the anonymous group Destructive Creation transformed in 2011 with their world-famous art action "In Pace with the Times". What were once soldiers of the Red Army became well-known comic heroes and other American pop-culture figures such as Superman, Ronald McDonald, and Santa Claus. Below, the words: "In Pace with the Times" [V krak s vremeto] were curating the unexpected metamorphosis of the WWII heroes. What was Destructive Creation's message?

"In Pace with the Times" - Destructive Creation. Sofia, 2011. CIDMSA's archive

"At this time a friend wanted to start a company and I was helping him with documents, so we went to some institutions in the municipality.", started Q. as I was asking him about his motivations to "dress" the soldier soldiers as superheroes. *"In the cabinet, we entered there were a chichka* [uncle – derogatory] *and a lelka* [aunt – derogatory] *sitting on a table, drinking coffee and everything was piled up in some folders saying "case". So many folders everywhere that, they would fall on your head at any moment. Disgustingly smoky with cigarettes and stinking like mandzha* [cooked meal]*",* Q[25]. laughed. *"Yes, it's 2011, stinks of food, it stinks of cigarettes. And they lined up a bunch of things for us, just to not help us. Even though it was 2011, 20 years after the fall of the soc* [socialism – derogatory]*, things were super like taken out of a soc movie. It's like nothing has changed at all. Everything – in the institutions, in the way the state moves, in people's mindsets… It continues to be soc in Bulgaria... Many people still live in the past with their behaviour from then, with their understanding from then, with the expectations from then. And we were like what*

[25] Q is in his early 30s.

is the biggest symbol of all that? The biggest symbol of communism in Sofia? We immediately thought of the Monument. How we can illustrate the imitation of the West actually. That's where Superman came from", he explained.

This was not the first time during my fieldwork I would hear people emphasising the continuous effect of the past. Like in other anthropologists' observations (Kofti 2016, Kaneff 2022, Ringel 2022, Gallinat 2022), Q. among many of my interlocutors appeared to have quite a different understanding of the scholar's emphasis of rupture over continuity, assuming an implicit endurance of the socialist past in the current time. Talking about the Monument, prompted numerous conversations about the "ghosts" of the past that are still here and need to be "dismantled" to achieve the desired future "good" life. Moreover, Q's words suggest not only a temporal, but also a spatial consideration: the present is constructed as an imitation of the "West", which has become the end point of reference to which the transition had to lead, but had failed. In this sense, the present has become not only still-past but also not-yet-West. Destructive Creation's "In Pace with the Times" was among many things, an ironic commentary on the transition period as rather "unfinished". What was holding Bulgaria back from being in pace with the times (and space)?

While I was speaking to Q. I was reminded of another conversation I had in December 2023, when I asked a person observing the dismantlement about his opinion on Sofia's new mayor[26], who had promised to make sure the process will be finished in his campaign.

"Who? Terziev? He is the same communist… You know what Mephistopheles said: 'I am part of that power which eternally wills evil and eternally works good.' He was only looking for his

[26] The 45-year-old tech entrepreneur Vasil Terziev was newly elected in November 2023, supported by Bulgaria's main pro-European parties. He had promised to go ahead with removing the Monument as another debate raged over his family's connections to Communist party structures of State Security.

interests to please Brussels. The same as it was in the 90s. You know that UDF was a product of BCP in Lukanov's apartment, right? Same story all over again", argued Pavel, a 52-year-old artist, who had, as he told me, been "repressed during the regime".

As I came to notice arguments like this were unfolding in two directions and containing different reasoning behind the idea of the effects of the past over the present. Coming mainly from people above 50 years old, the first such claims were envisioning different political figures as the "same communists", holding them accountable for what was perceived as the "same story all over again", only "imitating" to be "democratic"/"West" (cf. Kofti 2016). Reflecting this understanding, "In Pace with the Times" was seen by many as commentary on the early transition period, when akin to other post-socialist countries, (Salverda and Abbink 2012), former elites known as "nomenklatura" maintained power through extensive privatisation and embezzlement of state enterprises orchestrated by predatory networks, known as "thugs"/"mutri" (Petrunov 2006, as cited in Junes and Iliev 2023: 59).

As Junes and Iliev (2023) have shown, these complexities of the early transition years, played a major role in the construction of a "double confusion" putting "democracy" and "communism" against each other. Arguing that the political establishment exploits this discursive division to obscure these intricacies and deflect responsibility for the enduring systemic crisis, the authors illustrate how this tactic reinforces the perception of today's neoliberal institutions as inevitable, masking their contingent emergence due to the state's inability to curb "parasitic behaviour" (ibid: 60). Hence, more than thirty years after the beginning of the transition, even though Bulgaria's problems are not those of communism, "but with the social ramifications of capitalism 'tout court" (Bohle and Greskovits 2009; ibid:72)", anti-communism would remain a main rhetoric, used not

only by the political elites but also by the civic society, who continue to implement it as a "recycled" protest repertoire (following Tilly 2008). As the authors nicely put it:

> "Civic energy […] influenced by the spirit of anti-communism promoted by the reformist elites of the 1990s, remains trapped in a performative re-enactment of 'anti-communist' protests" (ibid:72).

The other root behind the arguments about the continuous effect of the past had a demotist nuance. Widely appropriated both by younger, elderly citizens and in the political scene, they bring to responsibility the ones "still living in the past", having not managed to integrate into the new democratic times. In this emic theory the "transition" was seen as not yet finished and was presented to me as a threefold process with economic, institutional and societal aspects. While most of my interlocutors agreed to a better or lesser extent that the first two were established, many of them stressed the enduring influence of the "communist mindset". This was pictured as a set of imagined dispositions (behaviour, beliefs, expectations) perceived as "inherited" from the "past", and attributed to specific people perceived as not able to integrate in the present. Often seen as people with "communist mindsets", they are constructed as a sort of inner-Other "bad citizen", discursively put in opposition to the self-proclaimed "good citizen"[27] – an anti-communist, pro-European oriented, responsible, free-thinking, active entrepreneur, (neo)liberal, who does not count on the state, but "on himself":

> *"A person relies on himself, this is the patriotic attitude. But the communist regime, and I lived at that time, taught people not to rely so much on their own knowledge, skills and abilities, not to... not to work for their own development, whether we are talking about*

[27]Similarly, Tsoneva (2017: 126) analysed the discursive boundaries of civic identities, crafting the idea of the "active citizen" in opposition to the "anti-citizen" during the 2013 anti-governmental protests.

> *physical work or for intellectual effort. Make an effort to develop as a person! Here I am reminded of that phrase, if I'm not mistaken, by Reagan: "Don't ask what the country can do for you, ask what you can do for the country". This is the normal attitude."* (Asen Genov)

This discursive opposition stresses the need for "decommunisation of thinking", which would eventually lead to the establishment of a new society with educated, self-disciplined, and self-responsible "good citizens". To achieve the final stage of this imaginative teleology all traces of the past needed to be "dismantled", as some of my interlocutors put it.

Such treatment of people as temporally backwards is not exclusive to my fieldwork. It mirrors other cases where specific groups are essentialised as underdeveloped or uncivilised, a theme prevalent in the extensive deconstructive literature on Balkanism, European Orientalism, and European Easternism. Drawing on Said's "epistemological concerns" on Orientalism as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 1978:3), scholars have demonstrated how Foucault's pouvoir-savoir dynamics (1972) operate in various geographical and cultural contexts. Influential works in this vein, notably Larry Wolff's "Inventing Eastern Europe" (1994) and Maria Todorova's "Imagining the Balkans" (1997), focus on the discursive construction of Europe's internal Others. In the current case, however, the language constructing the inner-Other is used by locals to demonise other local populations and is illustrative of the internalisation of such hegemonic discourses. Let's delve into this process more closely and see what the role of space in this teleology is.

Berlin Wall(s), Waiting for Democracy and "Standby Transition"

"We cannot have a totalitarian totem in the centre of a European capital. If this monument is not gone, we cannot regain our national dignity. It must disappear for us to continue our journey as a democratic society" (casual conversation with an observer of the dismantlement, December 2023).

Statements like these were far from isolated, both in what I heard on the streets and on social media. They often emphasised the "Bulgarian European path," "national dignity," and "democracy", alongside the desired image of Sofia as a "European" and "beautiful" capital. The more I listened, the more I understood Lefebvre's assertion that any society that claims to be "real", needs to produce its "own space" (Lefebvre 1991: 53).

Quite ironically the French philosopher's ideas were related to the establishment of the socialist space – the one perceived by my interlocutors as "undemocratic". However, in the same way, he was posing the theoretical question of "whether it is legitimate to speak of socialism where no architectural innovation has occurred, where no specific space has been created" and if it would "not be more appropriate in that case to speak of a failed transition?" (1991: 55), people were raising the problem whether they can speak about "democracy" if they still haven't dismantled the Monument of the "communists".

Thus, in this (imagined) dialogue with Lefebvre's ideas about the need to establish a new space to fully realise a specific type of society, the Monument came to be seen as the "Bulgarian Berlin Wall" – an imaginary wall separating Bulgaria from the "West" and "normal development", the destruction of which will open the way for the European unification. In this understanding, the Monument is not seen as a physical object dividing Sofia but is constructed as a symbolic obstacle separating the whole country that needs to be "dismantled" to achieve the awaited "normality".

And while amid the exaltation of the process of the dismantling, the anticipated future seemed to be close, after the Soviet Soldier and his comrades were ritually beheaded, the empty plinth and the fences came to rather represent the perceived present state of being stuck in the "post-".

In April, four months after the start of the dismantlement, this subtle alteration was expressed by Asen Genov like this:

> *"That's why I call it the Bulgarian Berlin Wall. Because it is a symbol of division. It is the anchor that keeps Bulgaria in the past. And now, when the communist regime fell in 1989, this monument is symbolic of what happened. We have neither completely exited the communist regime, nor dismantled this monument to the end. We removed the most striking symbol, the Soviet soldier with the sword raised above his head, the automatic pistol. But the plinth remained, the base remained. More or less the same happened on November 10, 1989."*

Hence, the Monument's empty plinth, became a spatial representation, entailing both what is perceived as a not-yet-finished transition and the ongoing anticipation for a better future. As Tsoneva puts it, "from a temporal inconvenience, the transition has become permanent" (2019: 273-4). Engaging with Ringel's question if we can "find a theoretical framework, in which 'post-socialism' can account for both change and continuity" (2022: 199), I propose to scrutinise this current state of stuckness in the "post-" with the alternative term "standby transition"— a teleological mindset, characterised with the continuous perception of transition as "never-ending"

and with the simultaneous Estragonian waiting for a more promising future, often (but not exclusively) linked with the imagined "West"[28].

This developmentalist thinking mirrors the 1990s Western-influenced visions of transition as a linear process leading to the establishment of a neoliberal economy, intended to "equalise" Eastern Europe with "the West." In this context, the people imagined as being the "same communists" or having "communist mindsets" have become a sort of a temporal inner other, that like a "Berlin Wall" holds back Bulgaria from the awaited normality. The term "standby transition" grasps these internalised developmental expectations, where locals are passively taking accountability on those "who live in the past" and need to become "good citizens".

Hence, despite "having become nearly as clichéd as the tropes they seek to unpack" (Ballinger 2017: 19) cases of othering akin to this, are illustrative of the pervasive "stickiness of progress-thinking" Gallinat (2022) not only continue to influence Eastern Europe but has been internalised and operate from the inside. As Gallinat has argued: "our understanding of the world remains wedded to a view of time as progress, and that this structures an imagination of temporal others that continues to justify hegemony" (2022: 167). Therefore, this case is among the many illustrative for the need to adopt an analytical frame that takes into account post-socialism as part of the wider global processes and dimensions of socio-economic inequalities (Bodnar 2006; Chari and Verdery 2009).

[28] I have been inspired for this term by my friend and colleague from the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences Mina Hristova, who crafted the notion of "standby migration" to grasp a process of decision and the first steps towards migration, caused by "the intertwining of two factors – disappointment in life conditions provided by the state (leading to detachment) and relying on a more promising future in the "imagined West" (Hristova 2019:2, 2020)

Liberals and Nationalists Together in the Fight against "Communism": 16th of April

On April 16, 2024, I found myself in front of St. Nedelya Church in central Sofia, where 99 years ago what is referred to as "the bloodiest act of terrorism in Bulgarian history" took place. The so-called Sveta Nedelya terrorist attack occurred on Great Thursday, 1925, during General Konstantin Georgiev's funeral, when activists of the Bulgarian Communist Party set off a bomb on the roof of the church, killing 134 people and wounding 500. Being a response to the white terror that ensued after the *coup d'état* of 1923, the explosion aimed to kill the military and political elite. The aftermath saw a new wave of persecution (Vukov 2016: 162).

After 1989 this attack became a sort of "lieu de memoire" (Nora 1989) in the new wave of commemoration of the victims of communism, and a key point of reference in the construction of the socialist period as a criminal system. This year key actors in the commemoration event became representatives from various nationalist organisations, part of the "We Want a Bulgarian Monument" movement. *"We are gathering at 18:00 in front of the St. Nedelya Church". You are welcome",* told me after our conversation a week earlier the main organiser – Georgi Draganov, a 33-year-old conservative-libertarian editor of the right-wing website "War and Peace" (Voina i mir), and the leader of the "We Want a Bulgarian Monument" movement.

Arriving 15 minutes before the gathering, I saw a group of 20 young men, almost all dressed in black, holding two big Bulgarian flags. On their shirts, I recognised the symbols of their organisations, along with branded t-shirts featuring the sign of "decommunisation". More traditional participants in such commemorations had also gathered: liberal intellectuals, politicians from various pro-European parties, and members of the Civic Initiative for the Dismantling of the Monument. Draganov was greeting some of them before turning to the group in black shirts. With little time left before 18:00, he began organising the group.

16 April 2024.

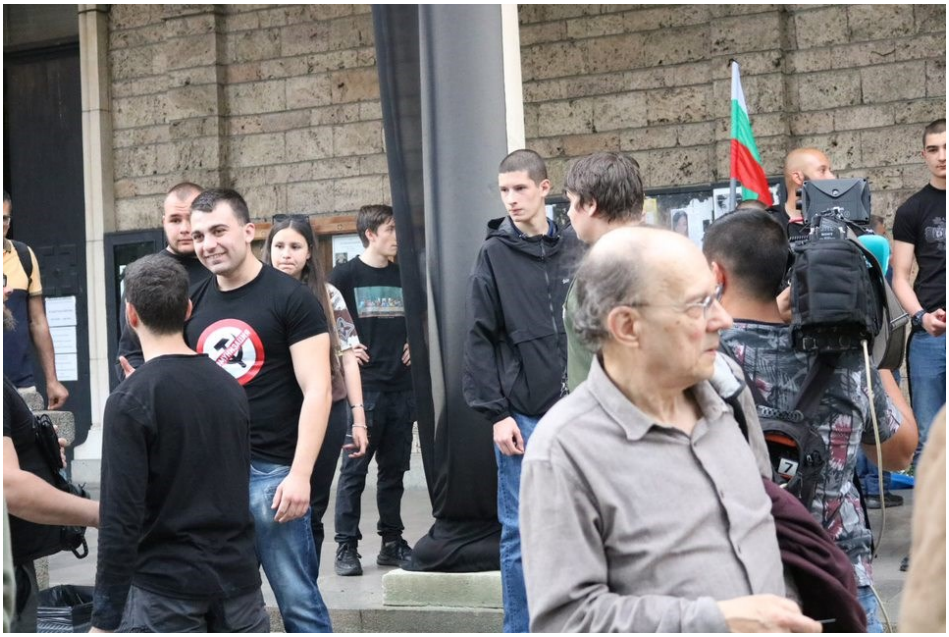
"We need two people to hold the torches and someone from each organisation to say a few words," he said, addressing the young men while holding a bunch of white chrysanthemums, symbols of grief. The boys lined up as if they had done it countless times. It was time for the speeches.

"Minutes ago, Rumen Gechev passed from here – for those who don't know a long-time politician from the Bulgarian Socialist Party – successor of the Bulgarian Communist Party. I asked mister Gechev if he would apologise for the terrorist attack. He looked at me and said, "But we apologised already, when will you apologise for Hiroshima?" In the end, he left, without apologising again. The communists are so insolent, that for 99 years they never apologised for the killing of so many Bulgarians. We are here today to honour the memory of these Bulgarian heroes", Georgi started.

Representatives of various organisations took turns speaking on the improvised "stage", surrounded on both sides by boys holding torches and Bulgarian flags. One of them was holding a poster

comparing the communist aviator Asen Agov, who delivered the bomb for the attack on the church, and the leader of al-Qaeda. Earlier in the day, he and his organisation vandalised a memorial tablet on the façade of the home in Sofia, where he used to live. The slogan of the poster compared the two men with the caption "Dismantling".

"There is no difference – Dismantling" – Comparison of communism with al-Qaeda's terrorism. April 2024.



16 April 2024.

I remember thinking that if an average-educated liberal saw this scene they would be confused. As I came to notice during my fieldwork, a lot of my Bulgarian friends fitting into this category were surprised when I was telling them about my research. *"But the nationalists are "for" the monument, right?",* they would ask me. *"Don't they love Russia?",* they would continue.

This confusion stems from several reasons. First, the stereotypical image of the "nationalist" is positioned in the same "illiberal" discursive sphere, on which liberals have placed "communism" as opposed to "democracy". The same logic builds imaginative connections between modern-day Russia, as a successor of the Soviet Union, and communism. What is more, this image is related to the post-1989 construction of Bulgarian nationalism in close relation to Russian sympathies (Chapter 1). In this sense, for liberals, it is difficult to understand why the same nationalists, whom they have demonised, participate in the fight against communism. Who were the communists that the nationalists were fighting, then? Were they the same "communist mindsets" of the liberals?

Although to some extent these types of anti-communism overlap, there were some differences between the two discourses. While the first, as I showed was built more on a "double confusion" creating the binary opposition between democracy and communism, the second is an integrated part of a subcultural repertoire, seen as "a base of the nationalist philosophy", as some of them put it. Moreover, as Gökarıksel (2020: 219) has argued, contemporary anticommunism can be seen as a fusion of various historical manifestations of anticommunism emerging in different periods. Drawing parallels to Moishe Postone's analysis of National Socialism in Germany, he argues that the discursive practice of anticommunism resembles that of antisemitism (1986, as cited in Gökarıksel).

Consequently, anti-communism functions here as a typical form of banal nationalism (Billig 1995), which uses the "spectre of communism" to mobilise various political claims. Discussions about "decommunisation" emphasise the effects of the past as obstacles to resuming the interrupted pre-1944 "Bulgarian national path". Thus, it can be seen as a sort of "banal anti-communism," where anti-communist rhetoric and symbols are employed on an everyday basis —through stickers, t-shirts, slogans, etc.— mixed with other practices of banal nationalism in the consolidating of the nationalist ideology.

"Guardians of the Memory": Grandpa Lenin and the New Anti-Fascists

"What a funny fate. My brother, a minor, was nailed with a chain much bigger and much more powerful, and I, already an old person, nailed myself alone. This is my protest against the Regional Governor. Because I have sent 8 letters, to whom I don't have answers, and with which I have begged officially to voluntarily put a new plaque to the Monument to the Soviet Army" [...] We are all guilty that we let these young boys putting this simpletons slogan – "We Want a Bulgarian

Monument". I have proof that this Monument is Bulgarian, built with the volunteer labour by our fathers and grandfathers!".

This is how Grandpa Lenin, a long-term activist fighting for the preservation of the Monument to the Soviet Army, started a video in which he recorded his performance protest. Having managed to go through the metal fences, unnoticed by the watchful eyes of the policemen, he had tied himself with iron chains in front of the plinth.

"I went through this hole", he showed me a small gap in the fences, when we met at the beginning of May 2023. The 80-year-old retired engineer had been voluntarily cleaning the Monument for years every time there was vandalism against it. Together with other volunteers, he had recreated completely the broken plaque, which he was asking to be put in the place of the broken one.

As I asked him why he was spending so much energy on the Monument, he started telling me the story of his name. In 1943, he began, when he was about to be born, his 16-year-old brother, decided to be a partisan and stole some guns. At this time the white terror was unfolding in the country. "*For such action, people got sentenced to death, so my mother was advised to hand my brother over to the police voluntarily to get away with it as he was still a minor. Thus, chained up, as I was a few days ago, he was handed over to the police, but he was subsequently sentenced and my mother almost lost hope.*", he stopped. I could see it was difficult for him to talk about this. *"On the verge of death",* he continued, "*my brother was then saved from the death sentence by the Red Army that entered Bulgaria."* His pregnant mother decided to name him Lenin, in honour of the red soldiers.

Much like other elderly representatives of the network of supporters of the Monument for Grandpa Lenin, these actions had personal nuance, mixed with nostalgia for what was seen as more "certain"

times. What came after “the Changes” for him was seen as “fake democracy” used to express a vague and general dissatisfaction with the present state of neoliberalism. Bulgarianness was constructed in relation to this more promising past, serving as a temporal reference for the "good life”.

As Junes and Iliev (2023:69) illustrate, by glorifying the “better” past BSP also contributed to the “double confusion” around “communism” and “democracy”. Within the complexities of the early transition when the former communist nomenklatura quickly transformed into ruthless capitalists, BSP strategically blamed “democracy” as the main culprit, diverting attention from their own role in establishing predatory capitalism (ibid: 66).

Flowers in front of the almost empty plinth. December 2023.

On the other side, understanding the subtle emic nuances of the imagined "good life" can bring some analytical potential in the deconstruction of such dichotomies. As Maria Todorova has argued, "post-communist nostalgia" can be seen as the "reverse side of Balkanism". While the last is a Western European imposed image of the Balkans as backward, nostalgic feelings are a longing for the past that is not overshadowed by negative stereotypes. Contrastingly idealising life in the region as economically stable, they can serve as a counter-narrative to the images of socialist modernity produced by the West (Todorova 2012). As a study on Poland that Todorova refers to points out "what people remember about socialism is a pride in production and in their labour, and also a sense of being part of a project that was *modern* and directed towards the general good" (ibid: 70).

Other figures in this discursive sphere are the participants in "Guardians of the Memory", an association registered in April amid the legal attempts to stop the Regional Administration's decision to dismantle the Monument. Created by Sergei Mahalev, a Russian-born politician from the right-wing pro-Kremlin party Vazrazhdane, the association aimed to preserve "the memory of the victory against fascism", and– to fight, as Sergei explained, against "neofascism".

Interestingly, although Vazrazhdane itself reproduces classic fascist discourses, the notion of "fascism" was widely utilised among the party and its supporters. It was adopted, much like in the Kremlin narrative to explain certain dynamics of the present – to frame the war in Ukraine as a "special military operation" for the "de-Nazification" of Ukraine. The dismantlement of the Monument, seen as an emanation of the break of the geopolitical relationship with the Russian Federation, was perceived as another neofascist action, by which the government, as Sergei put it, "forbids people to have their own opinion". Another example came around the COVID-19 crisis when the anti-pandemic measures were seen as a neofascist attempt of "the elites" to control the population. Therefore, much like the idea of the "same communists" of the liberals, the term

“fascist” was taken out of its original meaning and utilised to take into account contemporary political elites.

Paradoxically, the term “fascism” was simultaneously implemented among anti-communist liberals. Jana Tsoneva illustrates this “unusual revival of antifascism” amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine, where “titular bearers of the Bulgarian anti-communist right […] assimilated anti-fascism by making it Russophobic, erasing the Soviet contribution to defeating fascism.” As she argues, this instrumentalisation of the anti-fascist rhetoric is mixed with anti-communism, which is the same frame that Putin uses (Tsoneva 2023: 15).

In all these cases the past has been mobilised to critique the present, taking different forms: nostalgia for "better times," the historical memory of victory over fascism, or an elusive term to demonise political opponents. However as opposed to the anti-communist claim that “nothing has changed”, in Granda Lenin and Sergei’s case, the state of being stuck in the “post-“ unfolds in a different direction, in which “everything was changed” but not in a way that was desired. The standby anticipation for the “good life” is temporally oriented to an alternative vision of modernity. Following Todorova's idea that post-communist nostalgia is a counter-narrative of Balkanism, I argue that this understanding can also be utilised in the analysis of the anti-communist inner-othering and the way modernity continues to be seen as an exclusive project of “westernisation”. In the next chapter, I will further elaborate how these visions are imagined spatially.

Chapter 3. Spacing Imagined Futures: Between Bulgarianness and Europeanness

"For the future to be open, space must be open too."

(Massey 2005: 12)

"Between the past that is about to happen and the future that already was"

Art installation by Krasimir Terziev (Sofia, 2024)

"The Bulgarian European path". April 2024

By the beginning of April, spring had nestled in the trees of the Knyazheska Garden, and nothing could stop life from taking over. The metal scaffolding and the half-dismantled Monument to the Soviet Army had become a part of the setting and the alleys around were full of dogs, teenagers, and casual beer-drinkers. The wind had torn the banner depicting a tree with the "Bulgaria's European Path", with which the Regional Administration had covered the pedestal at the end of last year. With no announced official plans for the future of the space, the 27-meter-long plinth once holding the Soviet Soldier continued sticking out empty. Amidst the void, imagination took over.

Both a reminder of the contested past, but also a new stage for negotiating the imagined "path of Bulgaria", the empty plinth had become a territory for debating the "right to the city" between different groups of citizens and politicians, where multiple visions of the desired future trajectories were coexisting. This third and final chapter is oriented to this negotiated future and how it is produced through space. Looking through some important theoretical considerations about the relationship between space, time, and imagination, I will then present different clusters of spatial arguments and how they reflect different speculations about "Bulgarianness" and "Europeanness".

Space, Time, Imagination

To understand why the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia has become a focal point for negotiating various visions of the future, we must first recognise that "[s]pace is permeated with social relations" (Lefebvre 1991: 286). Lefebvre views the built environment as a social territory where political debates unfold (Lefebvre 1977: 341) and diverse social actors engage in the clash of "meanings, the confrontation of difference, reciprocal knowledge and acknowledgement (including ideological and political confrontation) ways of living, 'patterns' which coexist" (1996:

75). This untraditional "meta-Marxist" approach opens the idea of the "right to the city", in which one of the main characters is the urban creature, bearer of agency to re-imagine the cityscape with their everyday practices (Lefebvre 1996: 35).

The analysis of the interplay between space, political battles, and social imagination is further enriched by Doreen Massey's insights, which bring into the discussion the role of time. Building on Fabian's Time and the Other (2014 [1983]), she illustrates how the discourse on the West and "rest" is not only a geographical binarism. Instead "spatial difference was convened into temporal sequence" (Massey 2005: 68), based on the teleological presumption of a single trajectory where different places were interpreted as different stages in a single temporal development. As she put it in this spatial narrative: "Western Europe is 'advanced', other parts of the world 'some way behind', yet others are 'backward" (ibid).

This hegemonic temporal convincing of the geography of modernity into a single history has led to both the "repression of the spatial" and "the repression of the possibility of multiple trajectories" (ibid: 70), or what Fabian calls "denial of coevalness" (2014). Referring to the stance of not recognising the multiplicity of existence in the same contemporality, this idea originally highlighted the paradoxical "schizogenic use of Time" where although the anthropologists and the people they studied coexisted at the same time, the last were temporally distanced as not having reached the West's "present" (Loingsigh 2019: 45).

In this sense, space production is among many things a knowledge production, constructing differences based on temporal assumptions. As Massey put is: "the challenge of space is addressed by an imagination of time" and recognising spatiality involves recognising coevalness. Therefore, she suggests thinking about space inter-relationally – as a sphere "of dynamic simultaneity", "always in the process of being made", where "distinct trajectories coexist" (Massey 2005: 9).

Finally, the role of space in geopolitical imagination can be comprehended with the help of Taylor's concept of "social imaginary". As he describes, it refers to "the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (Taylor 2004: 23). This idea can also help grasp the spatial relationality of the self-imagination, where (national) identity needs to be constructed in relation to somebody other. As he argues elsewhere, "identities in the modern world are more and more formed in direct relation to others in space of recognition", which is often the space of "the members of the dominant societies" (Taylor 1997: 46).

In the following lines I will build on these ideas to illustrate how the empty plinth of the Monument can be seen as such a space of "dynamic simultaneity" (Massey 2005), where different imaginary future trajectories of Bulgaria meet. Furthermore, I will show how the "coevelness" of these visions is often debated, and some spatial projects are imagined as more temporally advanced than others.

Disturbed Europeanness: An Intruder in the Prince's Garden

"With the removal of the Monument to the Soviet Army, an opportunity is created for the space of the Prince's Garden to be rethought, re-planned, and redeveloped […] With the adoption of this decision, we will take the first and very important step to continue the development of the Prince's Garden in a European spirit, to turn it into a lively, modern, and beautiful place, attractive with its uniqueness for all citizens of the capital, because public spaces by design their task is to bring people together, not to divide them!" (City Council February 2024)

The above words are part of a report, with which members of the Sofia City Council proposed an international competition for ideas for the development of the space around Knyazheska Garden (in English: the Prince's Garden). The document, read during an assembly in February 2024, clearly

set the parameters of thinking about the future of the space under what was considered the disturbed "European spirit" of the garden[29].

The main initiator behind this report – the town councillor Vili Lilkov, leader of the newly formed right-wing party "Blue Sofia" and a professor of physics was engaged for a long in these debates. In 2011 he was also the main initiator behind the idea of renaming the surrounding park area to "Knyazheska Garden" as it was referred to before 1944, when it used to be a royal garden.

"My commitment is related to the fact that this is a historical space, very valuable for Sofia. Knyazheska Garden has a rather interesting history – the history of Bulgaria's integration into the European culture. Its development goes in parallel with the accession of Bulgaria and the acceptance of European influence and culture", Mr Lilkov started when we met in April 2024, insisting on telling me the story of the garden.

In 1882, as he explained, at the request of Knyaz Alexander I of Battenberg, it was turned into a Prince's Garden for flowers, vegetables and fruits for the needs of the palace. Then, after the arrival of Knyaz Ferdinand in Bulgaria, part of the garden was separated as botanical. *"Gardeners started working there, whom Ferdinand brought with him from Europe",* Mr Lilkov continued. In the next 30 years, parts of it were transformed into a royal zoo and later enriched with the so-called "Royal Kkindergarten" with a children's theatre.

"That is, it is a synthesis between botany, zoology, and culture that continued developing until the 1940s and reflects the transformation of Sofia into a European city. But the Intruder interrupted this development of the garden, which followed the natural European development of Bulgaria, of Sofia. The history of this garden before and after the existence of the Monument also reflects the

[29] The idea for such a competition was born back in 2011, but it was never realized.

cultural changes taking place in Bulgaria. The dismantling now would give the opportunity to start again this development, which the Monument stopped in the 1950s", he pointed out.

In this envisioned return of Bulgaria to its "European path", the European space is positioned in a discursive sphere of what can be called the "good space". This space is "beautiful", "lively", "clean", "safe", "democratic", "developed", "modern", and "civilised" – it is where the "good citizens" (see Chapter 2) go. On the other side, the intrusion of the Soviet Soldier in the Prince's Garden created another space seen as "ugly", "unwelcoming", "grey", "uncivilised", "anti-social", "non-democratic", and "totalitarian"[30] – a space for the "bad citizens". The first discursive space more broadly resonates with the idea of the capitalist city and the "West"/Europe (as an imagined geographical-cultural entity), while the second – with the socialist city, the "East", and the Soviet Union. Although the first imaginative space was constructed as a space of the "future", while the second – as a backward space of the "past", both refer to the period of modernity.

Scholars have illustrated important similarities between the capitalist and the socialist city (Bodnar 2001), and have argued that socialism and capitalism can be thought of as alternative modernities that unfolded simultaneously (Ray 1997). Despite that for my respondents they were not considered "coeval", but temporally positioned in two different moments of the same linear progress-based trajectory. Illustrative of the understanding of modernity as an exclusive project of westernisation, this imagined geography, echoes the affective emic metaphor of the Monument as "a Berlin wall" separating Bulgaria from the European project of modernity: *"That's probably the biggest problem of the communist regime. We were cut off from our path to the family of civilised nations. We were brought into the path of the Asian satrapies, the communist despots"* (Asen Genov).

[30] All these are words used by my interlocutors.

This denial of the coevalness of the socialist and the Western spaces of modernity is related to an older geography of knowledge where the imagined entities of the "West" and the "East" measured the distance between civilisation and barbarism. Larry Wolff illustrates how Enlightenment ideas from the 18th century onwards, coupled with shifting power dynamics, transformed West-East binarism from a purely geographical concept to a temporal one. Western Europe's economic development came to represent progress, in contrast to Eastern Europe's perceived "lagging behind" (Wolf 1994). Similarly, Maria Todorova demonstrates how by the early 20th century on the eve of the Balkan wars, the Balkans had become associated by institutions and powerholders with violence, nationalism, and brutality, with the same discourse being recycled once again on the eve of the Yugoslav wars (Todorova 2009: 4).

The discussions concerning the role of the Soviet Union in diverting Bulgaria from its trajectory towards the cultural, economic, and political progress of European modernity were also not quite new. Nevertheless, due to the discursive construction of contemporary Russia as a direct continuation of the USSR, the current aggression over Ukraine's sovereignty brought narrative parallels where today's Russian Federation has become an emanation of the antagonistic "evil" space (compared with Tolkien's Mordor). As Kuber Saparov from the Initiative for the Dismantling of the Monument to the Soviet Army expressed it: "*Russia is a terribly backward country. Terrible, horrendously lagging behind. A century behind other European nations. Both as a nation and as a model government. It's an empire. It simply remains trapped in history".*

In short, although Bulgaria's "spaces of recognition" were constantly shifting throughout the whole post-1989 period, the external shock of the war in Ukraine propped new possibilities to solidify Bulgarianness under the now seen as more secure space of "Europe". This imagined geography shares all the vices in the "standby transition", that would eventually lead to breaking all relations

with Eastern Europe, which on this teleological developmental scale, continued to measure civilisational distances. Nevertheless, this was not the only attempt to reimagine Bulgarianness that the shock of the war brought to the local political scene.

Symbols Fight Symbols: "We Want a Bulgarian Monument"

"The monument to the occupying Red Army [MORA] *is the largest communist totem erected in our capital. After its completion in 1954, it became the centre of the annual gatherings of the zombified worshipers of the communist lie, celebrating the blackest date in our recent history - 9.IX.1944. […] The day when the biggest pogrom against the Bulgarian people and statehood began, the consequences of which are felt to this day. […] But this outrage was finally put to an end. […] For the first time since 1954, the communists could not celebrate September 9 in front of MORA. Instead, we held the event "Goodbye MORA! We Want a Bulgarian Monument!". As the name itself says, the purpose is not just the removal of one of the most shameful totems of communism, but also to build a large and beautiful Bulgarian monument in its place"* (BNS 2023).

This is how the young men participating in the newly formed "We Want a Bulgarian Monument" movement described the unusual shape that the 9th of May celebrations took in 2023. Burning of a large red flag with a communist symbol, raising of countless Bulgarian flags (and only one European that was soon put down), slogans "Out Russia, Empire of Evil" and "Bulgaria is taking a national path" were only part of the picture that the Soviet soldier, still standing on his pedestal, looked down on. What was this Bulgarian monument that this young people wanted?

"This new monument should be big, beautiful, tall, the tallest in Sofia. To be of such a historical figure and in such an aesthetic way that no one has anything against it. To unite Bulgarians, not divide them.", explained the main initiator of the "We Want a Bulgarian Monument" movement Georgi Draganov. According to him the idea for a garden was not bad, but due to the

"traumatisation" of the space, there was a need for a "new stronger symbol" that would "erase" this "shameful" lie. As he put it, "Symbols fight symbols".

Although there were yet no clear visions of how exactly the space should look, the initiative's main idea was to re-use the empty plinth, putting a new monument of a prominent historical figure. Moreover, the whole garden was envisioned as a monumental project, with numerous other smaller statues of "*monarchs, generals, clergymen, leaders of Bulgarianness*" on the park alleys. The garden, as Georgi explained, had to be representing the true "Bulgarianness", which the Monument had suppressed: *"This monument is foreign. And on top of that, its title – "To the Soviet Army, Liberator of the Grateful Bulgarian People" – is a lie. The Soviet Army ruined Bulgaria, ruined our economy, our progress, our agriculture, our cities, our education, our demography, everything."*, he insisted.

Much like in the previous understanding of the disturbed "European path", the socialist period is seen as interrupting the previous prosperity of Bulgaria. However, the envisioning of the future emphasised on the "independent" national path of Bulgaria. The imagined "Europe" still functioned as a benchmark of geopolitical orientations but only to a certain extent. Much like the "East" the "West" was also held accountable for suppressing previous routes of progress of the country.

Scholars have illustrated the role of everyday "banal" use of nationalism (Billig 1995) through built environments for the re-imagination of national identity (Rowlands and Tilley 2006, Nora 1996). Vukov showed how after 1989 in Bulgaria the breakdown of the previous heroic narrative brought forward new moments in the interpretations of the past through monumentality, arguing that this was a form of "reinventing nationalism in a post-socialist context" (Vukov 2010: 55).

Nevertheless, this nationalism, although fuelled by "banal anti-communism", cannot be interpreted as a post-socialist re-imagination of national identity. Going back to Taylor's "social imagination", the spatial project of the "We Want a Bulgarian Monument" initiative, much like Vili Lilkov's "European Garden" is telling about the pursuits to redefine the Bulgarian spaces of recognition, as an answer to the external shock of the war in Ukraine. In opposition to the "European Bulgarianness" of the liberal and right-wing intellectuals, however, this point of reference was not the West, nor the East – both were seen as a potential threat to the "true Bulgarianness". Instead, the quest for spatial "recognition" was oriented towards the self, mobilising irredentist projects about "Great Bulgarianness".

"There Will Be a Monument Here Again": 9th May Celebrations

In the days before the 9th of May another two Soviet Soldiers on the territory of Lozenets district attracted my attention. One morning, the bronze "brothers" of the soldier from Knyazheska Garden found themselves wrapped in nylon. The peculiar transformation prompted ironic comparisons with the artistic duo Christo and Jeanne-Claude's work, known for their monumental wrapping projects like the transformation.

As the usual lieu de memoire for Victory Day celebrations was "obstructed", the public attention focused on the next monument in the list of debates – "Monument to the Soviet soldier – ossuary to those who died in the Patriotic War", as it was its official name. Located at the beginning of the Cherni Vrah park along the boulevard of the same name in Sofia, the memorial complex presented two Soviet soldiers with a bronze sculptural group, curated with the inscription: "Glory to the Soviet warriors – liberators". Marble reliefs depicting Soviet fighters complete the picture.

The same fighters, however, one early May morning, woke up coloured in red pain, while a Bulgarian flag and a crossed "Z" sign covered the plinth of the monument. This provoked the

mobilisation of the contra-offensive network of “Guardians of the memory”. After spending a whole night cleaning the monument, they organized themselves to voluntarily watch over the monument on shifts. The plan was to hold the 9th of May celebrations there, so to keep the monument ready for the holiday, they had decided to wrap it.

The wrapped monument in Lozenets

Monument to the Soviet Soldier in Lozenets painted before 9 May

The Monument to the Soviet Soldier in Lozenets painted before 9 May

Going down to see the wrapped monument in the late hours of the 6th of May, I noticed Sergei Mahalev – the leader of the "Guardians of the Memory" and a group of four other people. They were sitting on the right part of the memorial, surrounded by "provisions" that Sergei had supplied them with. The group included a Nina – 32-year-old lady working in a restaurant, Stanislav – a 49-year-old engineer, and Rado – around 50-year-old heir of a communist Bulgarian poet, and owner of a small business. In the following days, I would see them in this place every day, usually arriving after hours. As I came to notice, except for a badge with the "Guardians of the Memory" logo, some of them were wearing the so-called Saint George's ribbon – a Russian military symbol with a black and orange bicolour pattern, appearing as a component of high military decorations awarded by the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and the current Russian Federation.

"We wear them to recognise ourselves", clarified Sergei, who had been giving out the visual signifiers to the new coming guardians.

Saint George's ribbon

One of the days when Nina arrived, she was accompanied by a group of 15 young men, dressed in black, visually reminding the group of participants of the nationalist organisations from the previous chapter.

"Why are you here?", I asked one of the boys, Nina's 18-years old son, just finishing High School. *"Because I love Bulgaria! I'm a patriot, and I cannot allow a Bulgarian monument to be reviled. Russia liberated us and we should be thankful. We should and we should remember that!"*, he explained, *"And Russia is continuing to take care of Bulgaria […] Where does the cheap gas come from?",* his mother added in a defensive tone.

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On the 9th of May, I arrived at the half-dismantled Monument to the Soviet Army minutes before 10 am. Soon the first to pay their respects to the Soviet Army arrived – the members of the Bulgarian Socialist Party. Armed with Russian flags and red cloves (symbol of the party), they were led by the long-time leader of the party – Korneliya Ninova. As they could not lay the flowers on the Monument, they left them on a bench in front of the metal fences.

Celebrating 9 May 2024.

The celebration had to start with the “Immortal Regiment”[31] march from the Monument of the Unknown Soldier to Monument to the Soviet Army. Although the organisers of the event eventually did not get permission, 20 minutes after 10 am streams of people wearing Russian flags and portraits of their relatives, participants in WWII, started gathering. A large horizontally facing placard reading "Immortal Regiment" in Russian and Bulgarian led the procession.

Celebrating 9 May 2024.

Soon the celebration transferred to the monument in Lozenets, now freshly unwrapped. Arriving there a little before 11 am I saw that despite the heavy rain, around 200 people had already gathered waving numerous Bulgarian, Russian, and at some places – communist flags under the sounds of recognisable classical Russian songs. The Memorial had become a stage for speeches of the ambassador of the Russian Federation Eleonora Mitrofanova, politicians from BSP, representatives

[31] The "Immortal Regiment" is one of Russia's largest public demonstrations, originating in 2011 in the city of Tomsk. In this initiative, citizens search for images of their relatives who participated in the Second World War and march with them.

of the Anti-fascist Union, People's Front of Russia, and other organisations. A man and a woman were holding an eternal fire brought from Moscow.

Celebrating 9 May 2024.

"There is no other such clash known in history, where so many sacrifices have been given for the freedom of thousands of nations. Recently they called it Europe Day, but Europe Day was born thanks to Victory Day. There would be no Europe Day if there was no Victory Day," stressed Borislav Goucanov, BSP's organisational secretary, in his speech.

Against the background of the lively music, signatures for a referendum on peace and sovereignty were being collected. In the meantime, the Bulgarian Socialist Party was gearing up for another referendum for the Monument to the Soviet Army to be returned to the Knyazheska Garden.

Celebrating 9 May 2024

Celebrating 9 May 2024

This envisions for the future, unlike the previous ones, did not include any alterations. The Monument to the Soviet Army needed to be returned to its place. The future needed to stay as it was – before the dismantling, seen as an act of fascism against "the Bulgarian history and memory". Hence, here a third type of Bulgarianness was unfolding. Contrastingly to the "European" Bulgarianness, this one was spatially recognising today's Russian Federation as a continuation of a previous spatial point of self-reference – the brotherly Soviet Union. Once a main reference to a "good life" giving a sense of inclusion to an alternative project of modernity, this imagined space was transferred to today's Russia as the new benchmark for thinking about the "future path of Bulgaria". The rupture of the war only re-affirmed this vision of Bulgarianness.

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On this 9th of May the supporters of the "We Want a Bulgarian Monument" did not intervene in the celebrations. *"There is no point. We already won,"* one of their representatives told me. *"There is no monument here anymore, and soon there will be a Bulgarian monument,"* he insisted.

A few hours later, after the ceremony had finished, Maya Manolova, leader of Levitsata and the syndicalist Vanya Grigorova, leader of the newly formed party Solidary Bulgaria, visited the half-dismantled Monument to the Soviet Army. Holding bottles for spray painting, they wrote something on the metal fences with big red letters. The inscription said: "There will be a monument here again".

There will be a monument here again! 9 May 2024

Conclusion

The Monument to the Soviet Army in Knyazheska Garden in Sofia has been a centre of debate since the socio-economic transformations of 1989. However, the full-scale invasion in Ukraine at the beginning of 2022 prompted a new phase of contestation that in 2023 eventually led to the decision for its dismantling. This thesis tried to ethnographically grasp the evolving socio-political dynamic and geopolitical discourses in Bulgaria surrounding this decision, and what came after.

My Lefebvrian approach allowed me to engage with Monument as a contested space where different clusters of spatial arguments reflect everyday geopolitics, identity tensions and negotiations concerning "Bulgarianness", "Europeanness", and "democracy", spurred by the ongoing war. In line with Lefebvre's idea that transformative shifts in the social sphere necessitate the creation of new space, the Monument, came to be seen by certain groups of citizens as the "Bulgarian Berlin Wall" – an imagined wall, obstacle to post-socialist transition, the destruction of which will open the way for the European unification and the desired "normality".

Although, much like other such memorials, it was built to commemorate the arrival of the Soviet Army as "liberators" from fascism, amid the growing post-1989 anti-communist sentiments in the country, it came to be seen as a symbol of "occupation". Captured by the phrase *"Putin did us a favour",* used by my respondents, what brought a final rupture to this narrative was the recent war in Ukraine. The Russian aggression, discursively associated with the Soviet Union's arrival in Bulgaria, allowed the past to be mobilised for current geopolitical negotiations, re-framing the anti-communist argument into an anti-imperial logic.

Moreover, contributing to a recent body of literature, arguing for the continuing spatial-temporal relevance of the notion of "post-socialism", I illustrated how my interlocutors were assuming an

implicit endurance of the socialist past in the current times. To scrutinise this awkward state of being stuck in the "post-" where the "spectre of communism" has become a "zombie discourse" (Chelsea and Druta 2016), I proposed the alternative term "standby transition" – a teleological mindset, characterised with the perception of transition that is yet to be concluded, and with the anticipation for a better future, often linked with the imagined "West".

Finally, I demonstrated how the Monument's empty plinth has become a space for coexisting versions of "Bulgarianness", where different imaginary future geopolitical trajectories unfolded. One such spatial imaginaries envisioned the desired return of Bulgaria to its "European path" disturbed by the arrival of the Soviet Union, which diverted the country from its "civilised" route towards the cultural, economic, and political progress of European modernity. Although these "civilisational" discussions were not quite new, due to the discursive construction of contemporary Russia as a direct continuation of the Soviet Union, the current invasion in Ukraine brought narrative parallels where today's Russia and therefore the "East" have become, once again, an emanation of the antagonistic "evil" space in contrast to the "safe" and "peaceful" "West".

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Overall, this thesis, among other things, demonstrates that 35 years after the imagined "end of history" despite assertions that there is "nothing to transit anymore", people's understanding of the world remains trapped by divisions, imagined "Berlin" wall(s), and awaited better futures entrenched in a view of time as progress.

These Walls are not only Bulgarian. And they are not even only post-socialist. I am unsure if they are even post-Cold War (Cheri and Verdery 2009). Are they even "post-" anything in a world that continues to be confined by the grand narratives of modernity, where the "end of history" is still

anticipated? The socialist vision of modernity was only one of the many alternative trajectories that have been and are still excluded from this Western teleology.

Therefore, an important agenda for future research includes studying such walls as part of the wider global processes and dimensions of socio-economic inequalities (Bodnar 2006; Cheri and Verdery 2009), the persisting endurance of Westen-imposed visions of modernity, development, and progress (Gallinat 2022) and entrenched binaries of West-East, Democracy-Totalitarianism, and Capitalism-Socialism (Hann 2014). Possible questions for future research include: How does the Eurocentric idea of progress continue to influence societies in different parts of the world? How have such narratives been internalised by local groups and how are they utilised in the local political claim-making? How are they instrumentalised in different "post-" contexts to impose neoliberalism as the only possible trajectory? What other different visions of the future are out there? Hopefully, searching for their answers would eventually contribute to the falling of other walls. The "walls" in social sciences.

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