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The Museum of Socialist Art in Sofia and the Politics of Avoidance

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The Museum of Socialist Art in Sofia and the Politics of Avoidance

The article discusses the "Museum of Socialist Art" in Sofia as the first state-supported museum institution focused on the communist period in Bulgaria. Paying attention to debatable issues regarding its concept and structure, the text outlines the anxieties of the Bulgarian public about this museum, particularly about the "resurrection" of the former ideology and the "re-habilitation" of the artistic production during communist rule. The article gives an overview of the museum's main parts and outlines some of the aspects where they fail to meet the expectations of the public. These involve above all the lack of clear principles in the selection and arrangement of the exhibited items, and the restraint from taking a critical stance to the communist period - both of which provoked disapproving comments in public discussions in media and the internet.

New Attempts to Approach the Legacy of the Communist Period

The summer months of 2011 were marked by several new attempts to approach the complicated issue of representing and interpreting the legacy of the communist period in Bulgaria. After in June 2011 a group of artists had painted the Soviet army memorial in Sofia with images of pop icons^[1] and in September the Prime Minister Boyko Borisov had announced that the grand communist monument on Buzludja peak would be given as property to the Socialist Party,^[2] on 19 September 2011, a "Museum of Socialist Art" was opened in the Bulgarian capital. Differing by their purpose and public effect, these three occasions are indicative of about the tensions that have accumulated after more than two decades of reluctance of Bulgarian institutions to tackle the topic of communism in state supported representations.^[3] Since the early 1990s, monuments of the communist period across the country have been targets of public assaults and dismantlement (and, in some cases, re-installation), but no official position was taken on the fate of the toppled representations and on the policies of their substitution with different memorial and artistic signs. Whilst the famous mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov in Sofia was destroyed in 1999 after a governmental decision (causing until today speculations on the justification of this act), the majority of the memorial representations of the communist epoch have remained intact - usually neglected in parks and squares, but episodically turning into points of debate about their preservation and meaning. In a comparable way, there was a general avoidance of the recent past in museum representations in all regional and national museums of the country, dooming the national history to "pause" shortly after the establishment of the communist rule. Although there were several projects for creating separate museums of communism in Sofia, Dimitrovgrad, and Haskovo (mostly ones exhibiting toppled communist monuments), none was realized, leaving open the projects of presenting communism in museums and raising speculations about an institutionalized amnesia in post-communist Bulgaria.

The Establishment of the "Museum of Socialist Art"

It was largely in response to this void and to the expectations of enormous tourist interest that the "Museum of Socialist Art" was created. The news about its preparation came out several months before its actual opening - as part of an entire campaign to restore cultural monuments and institutions in Bulgaria and to build new museums in the capital, among which those of Contemporary Art, the Museum of "Ancient Sofia", and the National Museum Complex (the latter being known as "the Bulgarian Louvre"^[4]). Promoted as one of the future biggest attractions in Sofia, the "Museum of Socialist Art" was

supposed to "catch up" with other states in Eastern Europe, where museums of their totalitarian pasts have long been created. The museum was established as a branch of the National Gallery of Art, whose staff participated in the planning and arranging of the exhibition. The major input in initiating the project belonged in fact to the Minister of Culture, Vezhdi Rashidov - a sculptor, who had his early career during communist rule and who promoted the exhibition of the artistic heritage of the communist period as a valuable resource for attracting tourist attention. As emphasized in interviews before and during the opening, the museum was not only expected to "close a page in history", but also to be a profitable enterprise by hopefully paying off the price of 1.5 million euro for its creation within only two years of tickets' sale.^[5] Stretching on 7500 square meters in what was previously the "Red Star" living neighborhood in Sofia, the new institution was opened officially on 19 September 2011 by the Prime Minister and government representatives, in the presence of state officials, journalists, and foreign observers. The opening speeches emphasized the opportunity that the new institution provided to turn the past into history and to put the communist period finally within the museum space where its proper place was believed to be.^[6]

The pomp of the unveiling and the verbose explanations about the museum's importance could not overcome, however, some of the controversies that surrounded this project in terms of purpose, concept, and realization. After years of neglect for representing the communist period in Bulgarian museums, the attempt to do this in a "museum of socialist art" raised speculations about an agenda to "rehabilitate" the totalitarian regime before 1989 and to "eternalize" its ideology. The vagueness that surrounded the preparation of the exhibition and the lack of preliminary public discussions about the museum's content stirred suspicions about a top-down approach in interpreting the communist epoch, yet one applied by figures that were closely related to the previous regime.^[7] At the background of references about the Premier's job in 1990s as a bodyguard of the former communist leader, anxieties abounded about what the museum would actually represent: a starting point in the needed reflection on that period, a "last resting place" of delegitimized art works, or a new territory of socialist nostalgia.^[8] A primary point of criticism was the museum's name itself - initially meant to be a museum of "totalitarian art," but later changed into "socialist art," thus causing resistance about the choice of term ("socialist" rather than "communist") and implying a revisionist approach to the recent past. Whilst the focus solely on "art" was seen as an inadequate way to narrate the "socialist" experience, poignant remarks were made about the attempts to attribute new value to the artistic production of that period and about the museum's use of the communist heritage for "promoting Sofia as an attractive cultural and tourist destination." Although in interviews the Minister of Culture, Vezhdi Rashidov, and the director of the museum, Bissera Yossifova, explained that the term "totalitarian" did not cover only the period of socialism and that the word "communist" added an evaluative statement to its artistic production, the reservations that surround the naming of this institution continue until today.

Concept of the Exhibition with Some Critical Annotations

The structure and content of the museum furthermore deepened many of the anxieties that have appeared prior to its opening. The museum consists of three major parts - a statue park with 77 pieces of monumental sculpture from the communist period, an exhibition hall with 60 paintings and 25 easel representations, and a video hall for screening documentary films and newsreels from the communist times. As it was proudly announced in interviews with its director and staff, the museum has also got a shop with souvenirs - authentic objects from the epoch (slogans, photos, books), as well as contemporary artifacts, such as glasses with leaders' images, postcards, and T-shirts with communist symbols.

Visitors are welcomed by a large five-pointed star at the entrance - the one that topped the Party House in Sofia between 1954 and 1984, before being substituted by a more impressive one from Moscow that was taken down in its turn and dismantled in October 1990. The statue park forms the most representative part of the museum, including busts and figures of famous communist leaders and activists, monuments of poets identified by the ideology as bards of its ideas, and sculptures within the framework of the socialist realism - e.g. representations of partisans, Red army soldiers, agricultural and industrial workers, etc. Monuments impressive by their size (as the one of Lenin that once stood in the center of Sofia) alternate with smaller-size representations (such as busts of Todor Zhivkov and his family members), and with compositions on work-related themes of that period.

Already in this introductory part, the museum poses a set of challenges for understanding the message of the exhibited objects. Whilst some of the works may lead the visitors to perceive a continued form of communist propaganda, the lack of clear principles in the arrangement and the grouping together of works with different purposes convey the impression of a randomly set representation. Gathered from storerooms of several municipalities and galleries, the exhibited works form a collection, which is united solely by the period in which these works were created, yet without any distinguishing between the different decades of communist rule. Furthermore, the visitor is perplexed by the limited information about these objects. Aside from the brief labels in Bulgarian language stating the title, the author, and - in some cases - the town where a particular sculpture came from, there is generally no mention of the circumstances of creating these works, the history of their exhibition, and their functions before 1989 (as well as their fate after the political changes). This is particularly problematic when bearing in mind that, together with the works of exclusively propaganda nature, the museum exhibits also works with artistic values, some of them authored by prominent sculptors of that period. It remains a puzzle who defined the exhibited objects as "art" and what criteria were applied for this; how the works in the exhibition were selected and why others (in galleries' collections or in public spaces around the country^[9]) were left without consideration.

Similar are the reservations to the paintings and easel representations in the exhibition hall, where alongside emphasized propaganda works (e.g. dedicated to the welcoming of the Soviet army in 1944 or to the founding of communist party units), there are also still-life paintings, portraits, and landscapes created by artists who worked in that period. Here again, the lack of accompanying information about the authors, the history of the exhibited works, and the principles of the selection create a sense of confusion. In terms of topics, the majority of works are dedicated to the trials of the partisan and resistance movement during World War II, to the construction of socialism in the country, and to the happy life under party rule. However, whereas many of the exhibited works are barely to be labeled as "communist" by themes and content, the artistic value that some of them hold far surpasses their ideological function. At the face of intricate issues - such as those about the relationship between artists and a totalitarian state, or about the value of this art beyond the fall of the communist rule - the museum's withdrawal from an engaged discussion props out in a noticeable way. Whilst resurrecting works, which were once commissioned by the communist state, from oblivion, it failed to demonstrate an attempt for alternative representations of that period, thus excluding from view a range of themes that have developed after 1989 as critical reflections about the decades of communism.

Main Threads of Arguments in the Public Debate

It was mainly these silence and the ambiguous approach to the recent past that caused the predominantly unfavorable reaction of intellectuals and politicians against this museum. The most

poignant one came from the Union of Democratic Forces, which issued a declaration, stating that the museum demonstrated an attempt to "re-write" history and to "rehabilitate" the communist regime.^[10] Pointing out that it was unacceptable to refashion history by merely exhibiting works from Communist Party collections, the declaration insisted on developing a "true" history of totalitarianism, which would not only remind of the communist rule, but would also honor the memory of the crushed human lives. The emphasis that the declaration put upon the repressions, the persecution of political opponents, and the labor camps in communist Bulgaria did not appear by chance - it outlined clearly the insufficient explorations on these topics after 1989 and the relative reluctance of the state to revisit this experience. The criticism that the new museum failed to take a disapproving stance to the communist rule and that it refrained from denouncing its criminal nature resonated also in public discussions after the museum's opening,^[11] in the book with visitors' comments, as well as in various internet forums.^[12] Recommendations were made to overcome the deficiencies in museum's narrative by widening the exhibition with photographic materials about the communist terror, with references to other art forms (music, poetry, theatre, etc.), or with displays of everyday objects from the communist period. Albeit evolving from different considerations, criticism was undertaken also by members of the Bulgarian Socialist Party and by the then President Georgi Părvanov. Referring to the statement that through this museum communism ultimately finds its proper place - "in history," he remarked for example that it was curious how the museum would exhibit plants and factories built during communism, especially those that are still functioning at present.^[13] Insisting on the creative potential demonstrated by the country during the period of communist rule, Părvanov criticized the attempts of putting everything under the label of denial. The public response to the President's words took diverging paths again - on the one hand, in the affirmations that not everything built during communist years should be disclaimed, and on the other, in the insistence that - despite the President's assertions, communism had ended and its place was indeed back into the past.

The various positions on the purpose of this museum and on the ways to achieve a more adequate representation in it testify also of the complicated attitude that Bulgarian society maintains to its communist past. Well aware of the necessity to present this epoch in historical and museum terms, they also demonstrate both the confusion with how to narrate that period, and the constraints in undertaking a more reflective approach. Conditioned by the need to follow the example of other East European countries, the museum's reluctance for a critical involvement was partly a result of this confusion and of the attention not to tease or put in direct confrontation the numerous colliding viewpoints on the representation of the communist period. The ostrich game and the attempt for a somewhat negotiable approach to the past became, however, an even more serious trap. The only way to exit the delicate situation was to capitalize on being the first one of its kind and to postpone the critical reflection for a subsequent development of the exhibition. In the meantime, embracing the purpose of a tourist attraction, the museum would strive to pay off the investment for its existence.

Footnotes

1. See Yuliya Lazarova, Fotogaleriya: Pametnikat na Savetskata armiya vechе ye "v krak s vremeto", Dnevnik (18 June 2011), retrieved 23 January 2015, URL: www.dnevnik.bg/photos/2011/06/18/1108523_fotogaleriia/. The artistic action of decorating one of the reliefs of Soviet army attack during War II into famous figures of the American pop culture (Uncle McDonald, Spiderman, Batman, etc.) took place overnight and for several weeks the identity of its authors remained unclear. Widely interpreted as one of the bravest and most creative acts on the communist heritage in Bulgaria - comparable probably only to the David Černý's project of the Soviet pink tank in Prague - the action stirred a range of public discussions and reactions on behalf of political parties and state institutions. On the one pole of the spectrum was the disapproval of this act as an act of vandalism, and the insistence on a trial and sentencing of its authors; on the other, the action was hailed as an extremely talented performance against the rigidity and "standstill" appearance of the visual heritage of the communist era. A particularly striking point that popped out after the several students and teenagers who painted the monument were found out, was their comment that they did not intend to vandalize the memorial, because they did not know much of the heroes depicted there, but they wanted rather to depict the heroes of their own generation (sic).
2. The idea came after mutual accusations between the government of GERB and the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) during the anniversary celebrations that BSP held on Buzludja peak in the beginning of August. The official decision of giving the monument back as property to the Socialist party was taken in the end of September. See Pavlina Trifonova, Pravitelstvoto dade Buzludzha na BCP, no bez varkha, 24chasa (28 September 2011), retrieved 23 January 2015, URL: <http://www.24chasa.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=1056957>. Officially termed as the "house-monument of the Bulgarian Communist Party," the monument was opened in 1981, in honor of the Congress that was held at this place and that put the beginning of the organized socialist movement in Bulgaria. Staying atop a high peak in the Balkan mountain range and visible at a distance of many kilometers, the monument was an object of intensive debates for destruction or utilization for new purposes (museum of communism, conference hall, disco club, etc.). Whilst the state refused to invest funds for its maintenance, the Socialist Party also did not organize the preservation of the colossal construction; as a result, it was regularly plundered and much of its interior and decoration were destroyed. The debate about whose property the building was and who was to take care about its sustenance continued after the governmental decision as well, due to the Socialist Party insistence that the State should not withdraw from responsibility in maintaining this object.
3. See Georgi Gospodinov, Lipsvashtiyat muzey [The Missing Museum], Literaturan vestnik 3 (26 January 2005), URL: <http://www.slovo.bg/litvestnik/index.php?ar=1304> - link nicht mehr abrufbar!!!; Rositsa Gencheva, E-soc: virtualnite muzei na komunizma v Balgariya [E-Soc: The Virtual Museums of Communism in Bulgaria], Seminar BG (7 March 2012), retrieved 23 January 2015, URL: <http://www.seminar-bg.eu/spisanie-seminar-bg/broy7-kiberfolk/item/350>; Svetla Kazalarska, Pamet i istoria v muzeya. Muzeifikatsiyata na komunizma v Tsentralna i Iztochna Evropa sled 1989 [Memory and History in the Museum: Museum Representations of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989]. Sofia: (forthcoming); Nikolay Vukov, The "Unmemorable" and the "Unforgettable": Museumizing the Socialist Past in Post-1989 Bulgaria", in Past for the Eyes: East European Representations of Communism in Cinema and Museums after 1989, edited by Péter Apór and Oksana Sarkisova, Budapest: 2007, pp. 308-334; Nikolay Vukov, Protean Memories, 'Permanent' Visualizations: Monuments and History Museums in Post-Communist Eastern Europe, in The Burden of Remembering: Recollections and Representations of the 20th Century, edited by Ene Köresaar, Epp Lauk and Kristin Kuutma, Helsinki: 2009, pp. 139-159 and Nikolay Vukov, Visualizations of the Past in Transition: Museum Representations in Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria after 1989, CAS Working Paper Series 2 (2009), retrieved 23 January 2015, URL: <http://www.cas.bg/uploads/files/Nikolai%20Vukov.pdf>.
4. See Teodora Karoleva, Balgarskiyat Luvar gotov do 10 mesetsa, DarikNews.bg (26 September 2012), retrieved 23 January 2015, URL: http://dariknews.bg/view_article.php?article_id=968752; Tarsi se zvuchno ime za Balgarskiya Luvar, 24chasa (27 September 2012), retrieved 23 January 2015, URL: <http://www.24chasa.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=1561749> and Grisha Tabakov, Zapochva izgrazhdaneto na Balgarskiya Luvar, Balgarska natsionalna televizija (26 September 2012), retrieved 23 January 2015, URL: http://bnt.bg/bg/news/view/85441/zapochva_izgrazhdaneto_na_bylgarskija_luvyr.
5. See Otkrikha muzeya na sotsialisticheskoto izkustvo, 24chasa (19 September 2011), retrieved 23 January 2015, URL: <http://www.24chasa.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=1045185>.
6. See http://culture.actualno.com/news_360980.html - link nicht mehr abrufbar!!!; <http://bg.time.mk/read/958493c6e1/151efc9d58/index.html> - link nicht mehr abrufbar!!!; <http://bg.time.mk/read/958493c6e1/397cff97df/index.html> - link nicht mehr abrufbar!!!; Sotsializmat i komunizmat otidokha v muzeya, vesti.bg (19 September 2011), retrieved 23 January 2015, URL: <http://www.vesti.bg/index.phtml?tid=40&oid=4132651>; <http://bg.time.mk/read/958493c6e1/94b808977e/index.html> - link nicht mehr abrufbar!!!; Veselin Toshkov, As Europe marks the 20th anniversary of the Soviet collapse, Bulgaria opens museum of socialist art, Artdaily.org (2011),

- retrieved 23 January 2015,
 URL: http://www.artdaily.com/index.asp?int_sec=2&int_new=50047#UJaYvcXc_oA; Bulgaria opens its first Museum of Socialist Art, The Independent (19 September 2011), retrieved 23 January 2015,
 URL: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/bulgaria-opens-its-first-museum-of-socialist-art-2357566.html> and <http://bg.time.mk/read/958493c6e1/83bcda2c1e/index.html> - link nicht mehr abrufbar!!!
7. See <http://bg.time.mk/read/958493c6e1/83bcda2c1e/index.html> - link nicht mehr abrufbar!!!
 8. See e.g. the Premier's appreciative comments on the museum and on some of the works of art inside, <http://bg.time.mk/read/958493c6e1/151eceacd1/index.html> - link nicht mehr abrufbar!!!
 9. See abundant presentations of this in Nikolay Vukov and Luca Ponchiroli, *Communism of Stone: Monuments in Bulgaria, 1944-1989: An Album*, Mantova: 2012. (For the short version, see Nikolay Vukov and Luca Ponchiroli, *Witnesses of Stone: Monuments and Architectures of the red Bulgaria, 1944-1989*, Mantova: 2011).
 10. See Nedopustimo ye chrez ekspozitii, darenii ot fondovete na TsK na BKP da bade praven opit za podmyana na istopiyata, Sayuz na Demokratichnite Sili (20 September 2011), retrieved 23 January 2015,
 URL: <http://www.sds.bg/articles/4274>; I SDS ne iska muzeya na sotsa, BNews.bg (20 September 2011), retrieved 23 January 2015, URL: <http://www.bnews.bg/article-35228> and Georgi Marchev, SDS obvini GERB, che reabilitira rezhima s muzeya na sotsialisticheskoto izkustvo, Dnevnik (20 September 2011), retrieved 23 January 2015,
 URL: http://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2011/09/20/1160257_sds_obvini_gerb_che_reabilitira_rejima_s_muzeia_na/?ref=rss.
 11. See e.g. the debates on this topic in newspapers such as *Kultura* and the various interviews with politicians and intellectuals on this topic, Svetlana Kuyumdzhieva, Ne saves sotsialisticheski i savsem ne realizam, *Kultura* 13 (6 April 2012), retrieved 23 January 2015, URL: http://www.kultura.bg/bg/print_article/view/19554; Georgi Todorov, Delenda, *Kultura* 30 (13 September 2012), retrieved 23 January 2015,
 URL: http://www.kultura.bg/bg/print_article/view/20059; Adriana Chernin, Izkustvoto na nova vreme, *Kultura* 6 (17 February 2012), retrieved 23 January 2015,
 URL: http://www.kultura.bg/bg/print_article/view/19369; <http://www.marica.bg/show.php?id=66383> - link nicht mehr abrufbar!!!; <http://piron.phls.uni-sofia.bg/broj-4-2010/item/155-muzei-srestu-ironiata> - link nicht mehr abrufbar!!!
 and *Kultura* po vreme na kriza, *Literaturen Vestnik*, retrieved 23 January 2015,
 URL: <https://litvestnik.wordpress.com/култура-по-време-на-криза/>.
 12. Almost every of the internet reports about the opening of the Museum and the comments of politicians and intellectuals on its purpose and meanings are accompanied by a series of reflections in the accompanying web forums. Among the numerous examples (some of them listed also in references above), see also Lora Fileva, *Muzey za minaloto kato atraktsiya*, *Dnevnik* (19 September 2011), retrieved 23 January 2015,
 URL: http://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2011/09/19/1159258_muzei_za_minaloto_kato_atrakcija/; *Sotsializmat i komunizmat* and Nikolay Florov, *Muzey na sotsialisticheskoto izkustvo*, *Svobodata.com* (30 August 2011), retrieved 23 January 2015, URL: <http://www.svobodata.com/page.php?pid=6513&rid=29>.
 13. See Parvanov: IDK, "Neftokhim" i "Kozloduy" ne mogat da otidat v muzeya, *Novinar* (20 September 2011), retrieved 23 January 2015, URL: <http://novinar.bg/index.php?act=news&act1=det&mater=MzY4OTs2>; Elka Vasileva, Parvanov: Chudno kak Dyakov shte vkara v muzey AETs "Kozloduy", *Dnes.bg* (19 September 2011), retrieved 23 January 2015,
 URL: <http://www.dnes.bg/politika/2011/09/19/pyrvanov-chudno-kak-diankov-shte-vkara-v-muzei-aec-kozlodui.129189>
 and <http://www.segabg.com/article.php?sid=2011092000090000166>;
http://dariknews.bg/view_article.php?article_id=778426 - beide funktionieren!!!



Soviet army memorial in Sofia, June 2011

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