

**“THE BULGARIAN BERLIN WALL IS GOING AWAY
STEP BY STEP”: “STANDBY TRANSITION” AND THE
QUEST FOR “EUROPEANNESS” AND “DEMOCRACY”
IN THE DISCOURSES AROUND
THE DISMANTLING OF THE MONUMENT TO
THE SOVIET ARMY IN SOFIA***

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**„БЪЛГАРСКАТА БЕРЛИНСКА СТЕНА СЪПКА ПО
СЪПКА СИ ОТИВА“: „ПРЕХОД В ИЗЧАКВАНЕ“
И ТЪРСЕНЕТО НА „ЕВРОПЕЙСКОСТ“ И
„ДЕМОКРАЦИЯ“ В ДИСКУРСИТЕ ОКОЛО
ДЕМОНТАЖА НА ПАМЕТНИКА НА СЪВЕТСКАТА
АРМИЯ В СОФИЯ**

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Abstract:

The article delves into the most recent debates around the dismantlement of the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia, initiated in December 2023 amidst the Russian-led war in Ukraine. Drawing upon discourse analysis, ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews with social actors engaged in this contestation, it analyses how different clusters of arguments surrounding the memorial reflect broader social imaginaries concerning “Europeanness”, “democracy” and the post-socialist “transition”, spurred by the ongoing war in Ukraine. Despite the declaration that “there is nothing to ‘transit’ anymore”, 35 years after 1989 the Monument to the Soviet Army came to be seen by liberal anti-communist activists as the “Bulgarian Berlin Wall” – an imaginary wall, an obstacle to the post-socialist transition, the destruction of which would open the way for the European unification and the desired “normality”. To try to scrutinise

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this perceived state of being “stuck” in the “post-” the article introduces the term “standby transition” – a teleological mindset, characterised by the perception of the transition as yet to be concluded, and by the simultaneous anticipation for a better future, often linked with the imagined “West” and the state of being truly “European”. This progress-based narrative, however, is challenged by the diverse voices of the monument’s defenders – from the elderly activists’ critique of the post-socialist transition as a dismantling of a valued path to the far-right groups’ unexpected instrumentalisation of the anti-fascist discourse, as well as younger generations’ emerging voices that question the binary frames of the “standby” imagination. In this sense, by looking at emic nuances of notions like “transition”, “democracy”, and “communism” widely used by my interlocutors, the paper outlines some of the potential usefulness of advocating for the spatial and temporal relevance of the term “post-socialism” in contemporary anthropological inquiry.

Keywords: post-socialism, standby transition, democracy, Europeanness, anti-communism, Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia



Figure 1. The dismantlement of the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia.
December 2023. Photo: Roberta Koleva

“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)

Introduction

“The Bulgarian Berlin Wall is going away step by step. There is no longer a Soviet submachine gun sticking out over the heads of the people of Sofia, and soon, the servile, vassal mentality that the communist regime instilled in Bulgarians will also vanish, along with the ever-smaller figures of the subordinate people in the background.” (Genov 2023)

These words might easily be mistaken for a description of the events that unfolded during the turbulent period following November 10, 1989. Yet, they were penned in late 2023 by the popular Bulgarian blogger Asen Genov in reference to the developments occurring in Sofia’s Knyazheska Garden¹, when a crane menacingly hung over the Monument to the Soviet Army².

Although like other such memorials throughout Europe, this site was built to commemorate the Soviet Army’s role as a liberator from fascism during World War II, the growing anti-communist sentiments in post-socialist Bulgaria instigated a substantial transformation of the “brotherly help” narrative that characterised such monuments (see Vukov 2006). In official historiography, with the emergence of a new generation of anti-communist scholars, the role of the Soviet Army in the victory over fascism was strongly downplayed, with claims that there was no such a regime in Bulgaria (e.g. Bulgarian Academy of Sciences 2023). Similar memorial complexes throughout the whole country came to be seen as embodiments of “adulation to the enslaver, fanaticism, and oppression” (Vek 21 1993, as cited in Vukov 2006: 283).

However, while the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia had been a focal point of contention since the socio-economic transformations of 1989, it was only in 2023, amid the external shock of the war in Ukraine, that the official decision to dismantle it became politically feasible. As in other countries in Europe³, in Bulgaria, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 prompted new waves of rage against

¹ A central city park, that used to be a royal garden before 1944. Its name can be translated as “Prince’s Garden”.

² For a complete view of the monument before its dismantling, refer to Figure 7 (p. 64) and Figure 10 (p. 70).

³ 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 (Asharq Al-Awsat 2022).

the Soviet heritage in public spaces, due to the direct associations between Russia and the Soviet Union. The Russian aggression, discursively linked to the Soviet Army's arrival in Bulgaria on 9 September 1944, allowed the past to be mobilised in present-day geopolitical debates, reframing the anti-communist arguments through a refined anti-imperial logic. These events were instrumentalised in reinforcing the discourse about the "Russian Occupation" of Bulgaria at the end of World War II, marking a peak in the post-1989 disturbance of the "brotherly help" discourse. This, however, reignited not only discussions about Bulgaria's diplomatic ties with Russia, and its geopolitical alignment but also awakened the old 1990s discussions about the country's "civilisational" choices and the enduring "zombie socialism" (Chelcea and Druța 2016) rhetoric in the Bulgarian political scene.

After a series of resolutions effectively paving the way for the Sofia District Administration to proceed with the Monument to the Soviet Army's removal⁴, by late December, the sculptures on the top were taken down, with no official plans for the remaining compositions of the memorial complex and the space around it. Surrounded by metal scaffoldings, the 27-meter-long plinth, once holding the Soviet Soldier was left sticking out empty – both a reminder of the contested past and a stage for new imaginaries about the possible futures⁵.

Although earlier research (Dimitrova 2016) has demonstrated that over the years the memorial had evolved into an anti-monumental and apolitical space, in this article I contrastingly illustrate how especially in the past two years it has been instrumentalised as a medium for political imagination, becoming a main stage for Bulgaria's continuing quest for "Europeanness" and "democracy", spurred by the ongoing war in Ukraine. Mirroring the "transition" discourse of the 1990s, in one of the many narratives produced in this context, the Monument to the Soviet Army came to be seen as an imaginary "wall", holding back Bulgaria from pursuing its "democratic" path and "European" unification. Thus, despite the neoliberal trajectories that unfolded across the ex-Eastern Bloc (Bohle and Greskovits 2012), as scholars have shown, anti-communism remains deeply embedded in the region's collective consciousness (Chelcea and Druța 2016, Kofti 2016, Gallinat 2022a). More than three decades after the fall of the actual Berlin Wall, yet another "wall" seemed to require dismantling.

Why were people in Bulgaria still talking about a "transition" and "communism", when social scientists had long ago declared that "there is nothing to transit any more" (Horvat and Štiks 2012, Chelcea and Druța 2016: 538)? How are emic understandings of such notions implemented in the political scene and by local com-

⁴ At the beginning of August 2023, Bulgaria's pro-European government, which assumed office in June, officially 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 governor of Sofia District, Vyara Todeva, appointed to the post a few weeks after the government took office.

⁵ As of November 2024, the monument continues to be only partially dismantled, and the whole memorial complex is surrounded by sheet metal scaffolding.

munities? Is the dismantling of the Monument to the Soviet Army in this imagination going to be the end of “post-socialism”? And more importantly – what comes next?

Building on a body of recent theoretical discussions demonstrating the ongoing relevance of the term “post-socialism” (Kaneff 2022, Ringel 2022, Gallinat 2022a), this paper outlines some of the potential usefulness of the concept in contemporary anthropological inquiry, highlighting its particular utilisations in Bulgaria. Despite scepticism in social science about the term’s application today, the article illustrates that it remains potent in public discourse in the country, as people continue to use the temporal distinction between “before” and “after” to make sense of time. By following different groups engaged in the debates surrounding the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia – both defenders and activists advocating for its removal – I highlight the emic nuances of terms like “transition”, “communism”⁶, “democracy”, “fascism”, and “good life”, widely used by my interlocutors, and demonstrate how these notions are employed to mobilise various political claims. More specifically, I demonstrate how the emic metaphor of the “Bulgarian Berlin Wall” reflects a specific type of teleological thinking that I term “standby transition” – a perception of the transition as yet to be concluded, coupled with enduring anticipation of a “better” future to come, often linked to the imagined “West” and the state of being truly “European”. However, I also show how this portrayal is complicated by var-

⁶ Daniela Koleva has emphasised the need to clarify the “obvious terminological discrepancy” in the simultaneous use of the terms “communism” and “socialism” (2020: 22–24). As she notes, their interchangeable usage in the region is not uncommon and reflects various ideological distinctions, theoretical and paradigmatic preferences, and disciplinary traditions. “Communism” most broadly refers to the so-called “totalitarian” paradigm associated with the works of Hannah Arendt and was widely appropriated by dissident circles in the region. By the 1990s, the term “totalitarianism” gained popularity both in academia and in the institutional lexicon of Central and Eastern European countries, though, as Koleva observes, its adoption often reflected political stances rather than theoretical rigor (ibid: 22). On the other side “socialism” is more related to the so-called “revisionist” paradigm (ibid: 23), which shifts the focus from the political to the social sphere and emphasises everyday life, the nuanced processes of knowledge production, and the interplay between individual agency and power dynamics (often drawing on Michel de Certeau’s theory of everyday practices [1998]). In this context, while “communism” is often used by political scientists, the term “socialism” is more related to anthropological studies. Both paradigms, however, have faced critiques for selectively emphasising certain aspects of the era (Kabakchieva 2016). When it comes to the Bulgarian context, in the 1990s social scientists pioneered diverse theoretical approaches to studying the period, drawing on thinkers such as Max Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies, Marcel Mauss, Hannah Arendt, David Apter, Barrington Moore Jr., Claude Lévi-Strauss, Joseph Schumpeter, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Janos Kornai, and Ivo Možný, among others (Baeva and Kabakchieva 2014: 15–16). This plurality of perspectives has led to a range of terms used to characterise the Bulgarian society from 1944 to 1989: “totalitarianism”, “state capitalism”, “socialism” (with or without quotation marks), and “communism”. Notably, critics of the period tend to use “communism”, whereas “socialism” is more commonly used without quotation marks (ibid: 15). For further exploration of these terminological distinctions, see Kabakchieva 2010, 2016: 21–82.

As this text focuses on social imagination and knowledge production, I will primarily use “socialism”, yet I will follow source-specific or emic terminologies where appropriate to maintain fidelity to both scholarly perspectives and the local lived experiences and imaginaries.

ious other imaginations coming from the voices of the defenders of the memorial, for whom the “transition” is not necessarily seen as a progress-oriented movement, or by critical voices that challenge the binary oppositions (*West–East, democracy–communism*) often framing these debates.

To grasp these competing imaginaries, the research uses a qualitative methodology, based on ethnographic fieldwork and discursive analysis, conducted over different periods before, during, and after the dismantling of the Monument to the Soviet Army in December 2023. The ethnographic material is grounded on observations of the space around the Monument and in-depth interviews and casual conversations with representatives of key groups engaged in the debates surrounding the memorial⁷. I followed the claims of various liberal anti-communist activists like members of the Civil Initiative for the Dismantling of the Monument to the Soviet Army (CIDMSA), and the representatives of different networks protesting against the dismantling of the monument, such as the newly formed association “The Guardians of Memory”⁸ and the Bulgarian Anti-fascist Union. My analysis is also informed by official documents and conversations with state-affiliated actors, such as representatives from Sofia Municipality and City Council, and further talks with artists, leftist collectives, and other public figures and people engaged in the debates.

The article begins with a short historical overview of the term “post-socialism” and more recent theoretical discussions advocating for its spatial and temporal expansion. Subsequently, I build on this scholarship to grasp how the “ghosts” of the past continue to “haunt” the present in different discursive and epistemic dimensions. First, I begin by discussing the notion of the transition as an unfinished and ongoing quest for “Europeanness” and “democracy”, obscured by a perceived impossibility of breaking with the “anchors” of the past. Then, I continue by exploring how this narrative is challenged by the alternative imaginaries of the defenders of the monument.

From “Post-” to Ghost-Socialism

The term “post-socialism” was employed by social scientists to avoid the generalisations and teleological assumptions embedded in the dominant concept of “tran-

⁷ Some of the people I spoke to emphasised that they do not want to be anonymous, so I have kept their real names. In other cases, I have used fictitious ones. For those whose full names are provided, they are public figures.

⁸ It is important to note that the groups presented here are not the only ones constituting the discourses around the monument’s dismantling. Another major group active in the recent debates are the representatives of the newly formed movement “We want a Bulgarian monument”, predominantly made up of nationalist right-wing factions. However, for the purposes of this article, I have chosen to focus on the two groups mentioned earlier, as they most vocally represent the discourses and imaginaries around “Europeanness”, “democracy”, and the “transition” that the current text addresses. Elsewhere (Koleva 2024: 29–35, 48–52, 64–66), I have also analysed how the war in Ukraine has led to the fragmentation of the nationalist discourse in Bulgaria and how these newly formed groups utilise the monument’s void to articulate their visions of “Bulgarianness”.

sition” (Gallinat 2022b: 104, Hann 2002: 1), commonly used by economists and political scientists in the fallout of the 1989 transformations in Central and Eastern Europe. Mirroring the “triumphalist” declaration of the “end of history” (referring to Fukuyama 1992), the transition framework presumed a rapid, linear development from a seemingly obsolete socialist order to an ‘advanced’ neoliberal economy and multi-party democracy (Verdery 1996, Gallinat 2022b: 104). This perspective depicted change as a straightforward movement from a fixed starting point to a predetermined end, limiting understanding of the intricacy and ambivalence of people’s navigation strategies in the new socio-economic conditions (Hann 2014, Kofti 2023).

In response, anthropologists of post-socialism such as Katherine Verdery (1996) argued for in-depth ethnographic research that would demonstrate the multiple complexities of the aftermath of the Cold War and what could arise from socialism’s remnants. Studies of post-socialism emerged in these attempts to capture these diverse and often tumultuous transformations following the collapse of state socialism over the past 35 years (Bohle and Greskovits 2012). Despite the term’s prominence, however, by the early 2000s, scholars began questioning its continued relevance as a theoretical framework. Throughout this period and amid the official declaration of “the end of the transition” (Chelcea and Druța 2016), many scholars have highlighted how, after decades of political changes, the term began to lose its explanatory power (Hann 2006, Thelen 2011, Müller 2019). Moreover, post-socialism, originally having emerged as a critique of the positivism inherent in “transitology”, was itself criticised for functioning as a Western orientalisng intellectual construct, failing to recognise the local production of knowledge (Červinková 2012, Müller 2019).

Nonetheless, in the past years, a growing body of literature has illustrated alternative aspects of the validity of the notion. Chari and Verdery (2009), for example, suggest rethinking post-socialism through the lens of Cold War studies. This approach entails investigating how representations from the Cold War continue to influence contemporary knowledge production in both post-colonial and post-socialist contexts, especially in the prevailing dominance of modernisation theory in Western social science. The separation between these contexts, they write, “makes even less sense after 1989, when many socialist countries became, like postcolonial ones, synonymous with underdevelopment” (ibid: 19). Thus, juxtaposing the post-socialist critique of late-twentieth-century “transitology” with the critique of development thought found in postcolonial scholarship and exploring the mechanisms shaping those images in both colonial and socialist contexts (Verdery 2002: 17) is crucial to countering Western constructions of Eastern Europe as the European “Other” (Chari and Verdery 2009: 19, cf. Hann 2014).

Another important proposition to rethink “post-socialism” comes from Chelcea and Druța (2016), who introduced the term “zombie socialism”. They argue that while “actually existing socialism” has diminished in relevance as a political framework, its “ghost” remains instrumentalised for contemporary political claims, particularly by the elites. Drawing on Simonica’s assertion that “capitalism is not only built with the ruins [of socialism] but also by keeping its ghost alive” (Simonica

2012, as cited in Chelcea and Druța 2016: 525), they suggest that one way to analyse the enduring effects of socialism is to investigate how the “winners of transition” (the economic and political elites in Central and Eastern Europe) utilise the memory of state socialism as a disciplinary tool, framing socialism as the ultimate evil. This mobilisation of the past serves as a discursive mechanism that reinforces neoliberal hegemony in post-socialist societies, dismissing the social claims of the “losers” of transition as “communist, outdated, and anti-democratic” (ibid: 526). This framework helps us understand the emergence of new forms of capitalism and explains how some post-socialist countries have become even “more capitalist” than those with longer capitalist traditions in Europe.

Moreover, as Dominic Martin (2021) asserts, rather than simply following the collapse of socialist regimes, post-socialism embodies a “nested temporality” rooted in the decay of these regimes during the 1980s. As he writes “the socialist project remains as a palimpsest upon which is scripted contemporary political and social orders” (ibid: 3). This complexity opens space for anthropological inquiry into how history navigates between the socialist past and a “European future”, giving rise to new forms of “post-socialist subjectivity” (Martin 2021). Similarly attuned to the “looping” nature of the “post-”, Deema Kaneff’s (2022) importantly points out, that although anthropologists are critical when it comes to the relevance of the concepts of “post-socialism” and “transition”, people themselves still use such temporal distinction to organise what was “before” and what came “after” 1989 (ibid: 108). Therefore, as she suggests, it is crucial to explore the concept’s subtle emic dimensions.

In this line of thought, in a recent edition, Kaneff (2022), among others (Ringel 2022, Dorondel 2022, Gallinat 2022a, etc.), has 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 continue to 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 2022a: 156). As Kaneff concludes, the Cold War dynamics persists today in an altered form, manifesting itself through enduring displays of temporal and spatial dimensions (2022: 216).

In this sense, although post-socialism may appear to be a concept past its prime in the ontological realm, its diverse discursive instrumentalisations and emic nuances still warrant careful examination. To understand why people themselves keep using such metaphors as the “Bulgarian Berlin Wall”, depicting the continuing influence of “the spectre of communism”, it is essential to analyse how concepts of “socialism”, “communism”, and “transition” operate within public discourse. As scholars have illustrated, they can function both as “a tool of governance” used by the elites to solidify authorities (Kuljic 2006: 9, as cited in Junes and Iliev 2023) and among the local population, which can internalise, reproduce and instrumental-

ise such discourses in very different and unexpected ways (cf. Kofti 2016, 2023). Contributing to the recent body of literature discussed here, the following sections will explore two cases where the past acts as a ghost haunting the present, further extending the critical re-evaluation of the term “post-socialism”.

Towards “Europe” on a “Standby Transition”

By the beginning of April, spring had nestled in the trees of the Knyazheska Garden, and nothing could stop life from blooming over. The installed metal scaffolding around the half-dismantled Monument to the Soviet Army had become a part of the setting and the alleys around were filled with dog walkers, skaters, teenagers, and casual beer drinkers.

One morning, I met Dobri, a Bulgarian artist in his 30s, on the right side of the empty plinth, where a skate ramp was set up. We sat next to it, facing the so-called “Great Patriotic War” northwest facade of the memorial – visible above the fences surrounding it. This was the same facade that in 2011 had become a canvas for Dobri’s artist collective, Destructive Creation⁹, when they transformed it 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 World War II heroes. What was Destructive Creation’s message?



Figure 2: “In Pace with the Times” - Destructive Creation. Sofia, 2011
Photo: CIDMSA’s archive

⁹ The members of the art collective are anonymous – Dobri, like many of the names in this text, is a fictional name.

“At the time a friend of mine wanted to start up a company, so we went to some municipal institutions to sort out paperwork,” started Dobri as I asked him about his motivations to “dress” the soldiers as superheroes. *“We entered the office, and there were a chichka [uncle; a derogatory for a narrow-minded middle-aged man] and a lelka [aunt; a derogatory for a narrow-minded middle-aged woman] sitting on a desk, drinking coffee, and everything was piled up in some folders, labelled ‘case’. So many folders everywhere that it seemed they would fall on your head at any moment. The air – disgustingly thick with cigarette smoke and stinking of mandzha [cooked meal],”* Dobri laughed. *“Yes, it was 2011, it stank of food, it stank of cigarettes. And they lined up a bunch of documents for us, just to not help us. Even though it was 2011, 20 years after the fall of the soc [short from ‘socialism’, derogatory], it felt like we were still in a scene from a socialist-era film. It was like nothing had changed at all – in the institutions, in the way the state worked, in the people’s mindset... It continued to be soc in Bulgaria... Many people still lived in the past with their behaviour from back then, with their understanding from back then, with the expectations from back then. And we thought, ‘What’s the biggest symbol of all that? The biggest symbol of communism in Sofia?’. The monument came to mind right away. How we can illustrate the imitation of the West actually. That’s where Superman came from,”* he explained.

This was not the only instance during my fieldwork I would encounter reflections on the implicit endurance of the past in the current times. Like in other anthropologists’ observations (Kofti 2023, Kaneff 2022, Ringel 2022, Gallinat 2022a), Dobri, for one, among my interlocutors appeared to have quite a different understanding of the scholars’ emphasis on rupture over continuity. Talking about the monument prompted numerous conversations about the “ghosts” of the past that still shape contemporary Bulgaria and need to be “dismantled” to achieve the desired “normality”. Here the present was not experienced as a break from the earlier period but rather as a “haunted” temporality. Moreover, Dobri’s words suggest not only a temporal but also a spatial consideration: the present is experienced 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 a condition of being not only “still-past” but also “not-yet-West”. Destructive Creation’s “In Pace with the Times”, among many things, was an ironic commentary on the transition period as rather “unfinished”. What was holding Bulgaria back from being in pace with the times?

While discussing Destructive Creation’s action, I was reminded of another earlier conversation I had during the dismantling of the Monument to the Soviet Army over the days before Christmas 2023, when crowds gathered daily around the construction fences in Knyazheska Garden to watch the spectacle of the bronze figures being removed from the plinth. On one of the final days of the topping down of the figures, while I was capturing images, waiting for the crane’s movement, I struck up a conversation with Pavel – an icon painter in his 50s carrying a bag from work, who had arrived to see the dismantling. *“I intended to come in the last days, but work*



Figure 3: People observing the monument's dismantling. December 2023. Photo: Roberta Koleva

held me back. Now 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 – to see Sofia wake up without the Shpagin of the Russian Occupier menacingly looming over us. To feel free!," he declared enthusiastically.

Hearing this, I was curious about his thoughts on Sofia's newly elected mayor, who had promised to see the dismantlement process through. "Who? Terziev?" Pavel replied, referring to the 45-year-old tech entrepreneur Vasil Terziev who was elected in November 2023, supported by Bulgaria's main pro-European parties.

"He is the same kind of a communist..." Pavel continued. Despite Terziev's pledge to go ahead with removing the monument, a debate over his family's connections to the Communist party structures of the former State Security apparatus had simultaneously sparked controversy. "You know what Mephistopheles said: 'I am part of that power which eternally wills evil and eternally works good.' He was only looking after his interests to please Brussels. The same as it was in the 90s. You know that UDF¹⁰ was a product of BCP in Lukanov's apartment¹¹, right? Same story all over again," he further elaborated.

As I came to notice, arguments like those of Dobri and Pavel were unfolding in two directions, offering different reasoning behind the idea of the enduring effects of the past over the present. Coming mainly from my older interlocutors (above 50 years old)¹², the first type of such claims were typified by Pavel's perspective: the

¹⁰ The Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), formed in the wake of November 10, 1989, was a coalition aimed at breaking all ties with Bulgaria's socialist past. During the 1990s, UDF frequently clashed with the political successor to the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP), now renamed Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP).

¹¹ Andrey Lukanov and Peter Mladenov were ahead of the November 10, 1989 "palace coup d'état", when the BCP party leader and head of State Todor Zhivkov was "dethroned" from office. Later on, they formed a new "reformed" cabinet, aiming to present a more "liberal" version of communism and introduce more "democracy within the party" (Crampton 2007: 390).

¹² Many of whom participated in the protests for "democratisation" in the 1990s.

belief that “communism” had never truly left the political stage, with both “left” and “right” actors seen as the “same kind of communists”, simply masquerading “democracy” and “Western” ideals (cf. Kofti 2016)¹³. Reflecting this understanding, “In Pace with the Times” was seen by some of my interlocutors as an ironic commentary on Bulgaria’s transition, in the course of which, similarly to what happened in other post-socialist countries (Salverda and Abbink 2013), former elites known as “nomenklatura” maintained power through extensive privatisation and embezzlement of state enterprises orchestrated by predatory networks of criminals, known as *nutri* [thugs] (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)¹⁴.

¹³ Similar scepticism about the authenticity of post-socialist reforms and the perception that nothing has fundamentally changed was observed by Dimitra Kofti (2016). As she has illustrated, in Bulgaria anti-communism isn’t solely wielded by elites but takes on an “unexpected form” (2016: 5) among workers and ordinary people, holding “communism” responsible for existing workplace inequalities. This bottom-up discourse retrospectively employs anticommunism to elucidate the contemporary distribution of power, casting the new elites as “communist” due to their perceived unfair affiliations.

¹⁴ Similar situations are observed among almost all Eastern European countries, where the emerging middle class started thinking of the so-called “democratisation” processes in opposition to the “communist”, “totalitarian” past and over time anti-communism transformed into an oppositional repertoire emptied of its original meaning, employed by various groups. As Gökarkısel (2020: 226) notes, for example, in post-socialist Poland “communist” has become such “an elusive, yet politically useful term that almost every group [...] calls its opponent communist. While right-wing nationalists call “liberals”, “atheists”, and “feminists” communists in disguise [...], liberal and neoliberal groups call right-wing groups little more than right wing “Bolsheviks”.



Figure 4: The cut parts of the bronze figures, left on the bottom right of the empty plinth. December 2023. Photo: Roberta Koleva

The second line of argumentation about the continuous effects of the past had a demotist nuance. Widely common among both younger and older citizens, it brings 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 repeatedly presented to me as a threefold process with economic, institutional and societal/ideological/psychological 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*”¹⁵. Mirroring Dobri’s words quoted above, this “*communist mindset*” was pictured as a set of imagined dispositions (behaviour, beliefs, expectations) “inherited” from the past and attributed to specific people perceived as not able to integrate into the present neoliberal economy, due to lacking the initiative assumed necessary to make it. Often constructed as a sort of inner-Other “bad citizens”, people with a “communist mindset” are discursively put in opposition to the self-proclaimed “good

¹⁵ Svetlozar Rayanov, a retired ecologist and an activist, who on 23 February 2023 broke the plaque of the Monument as “a protest against Putin”, described this emic theory in this way: “*I first mentioned the political sphere, in which the transition was completed already 30 years ago, and the economic sphere, in which it is almost complete, although there is still partially state dictating. In the ideological sphere, however, or the spiritual sphere, this transition is not only not finished, but for me, it continues and will continue for quite a long time, excruciatingly long.*”

citizen”¹⁶ – a pro-European oriented, responsible, free-thinking, (neo)liberal, active entrepreneur, 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 have 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 physical work or about 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, interview, April 2024).

This discursive opposition stresses that for the transition to finally be over there is a need for “*decommunisation of thinking*” or “*transition in the mindset*”¹⁷, whereby people actively desire to “live freely” and take responsibility to do so. Such a transformation is envisioned to eventually lead to the establishment of a new society composed of educated, self-reliant “good citizens” who embody “true European principles”. As articulated by Svetlozar: *“[W]e need decommunisation of thinking because 45 years of communism created the impression that the state is the one that should take care of you. And many people even nowadays cannot realise that the one who should take care of the problems is you. Through your education, through your skills, through your communication with other people in society, through your participation in social initiatives, if you will. These are the true European principles, European values.”*

This framing of individuals as being temporally lagging “behind” is not unique to my fieldwork but resonates with broader themes in the deconstructive literature on Balkanism, Orientalism, and the otherness of Eastern Europe. Drawing on Said’s “epistemological concerns” on Orientalism as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (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” (2009 [1997]), focus on the discursive construction of Europe’s internal Others. More recently, Gallinat (2022) has examined how, in contemporary Germa-

¹⁶ Similarly, Tsoneva (2017: 126) analysed the discursive boundaries of civic identities, crafting the idea of the “active citizen” in opposition to the “anti-citizen”. She introduced the last term to capture the notion of citizenship and the confrontation between the self-described middle-class activists and the working poor as occurred during the 2013 anti-government protests in Bulgaria.

¹⁷ As Valentina Marinova, a psychotherapist in her early 50s, and the initiator of the Civil Initiative for the Dismantling of the Monument to the Soviet Army, further explained: *“Our transition will obviously be very long. Perhaps the first phase concluded with Bulgaria’s entry into NATO and later, the European Union, slightly distancing us from Russia’s orbit. But the transition doesn’t stop there – it must persist, especially as a battle for emotional, spiritual growth. This phase is fundamentally about a **transition in the mindset**, which is already an emotional transition that should occur in the minds of people – to want to have freedom, to want to live free, to value freedom. [...] So, the transition, I think, is still going on, and it’s probably going to happen in several stages.”*

ny, East Germans continue to be regarded as democratically “deficient”, positioned as temporal “Others” who must catch up with their Western counterparts. To capture these dynamics, Gallinat proposes the concept of “actually existing post-socialism”, which highlights the ongoing treatment of post-socialist regions as needing to complete their democratic and capitalist transitions. Thus, despite that for some observers frameworks exploring the phenomenon of “othering” appear increasingly irrelevant for analysing contemporary Europe (Ballinger 2017), as Gallinat illustrates, “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).

Similarly, my observations reflect the enduring anticipation for the transition yet to be completed, with those considered to be “living in the past” often placed accountable and targeted to transform into “good citizens”. However, in the case observed here, this aspiration is not only a top-down discourse but also a self-perception of feeling “stuck” and lagging behind. While some of my respondents highlight the failure of the present to catch up with the “West” and others focus on what they perceive as a political façade, they both underscore a common experience: the feeling of being trapped in a liminal state suspended between the past and an elusive post-socialist future that always seems just out of reach. This situation underscores the enduring influence of Cold War-era binaries that positioned the East and West, communism and democracy/capitalism, in reductive opposition, with the “West” always framed as progressive and the “East” as regressive. Not only does this epistemology persist, but it has also been internalised and reproduced among younger generations¹⁸, reflecting what Gallinat (2022) refers to as the “stickiness of progress-thinking”. This enduring sense of temporal displacement signals the need for an analytical approach that does not view post-socialism in isolation, but rather as

¹⁸ Interestingly, although for many young people the concept of “transition” lacks significant meaning, primarily because they have no lived experience of it (especially those born after the turn of the century), the terms “socialism” or “communism” are also frequently invoked, often with a pejorative or ironic connotation. As seen earlier in Dobri’s words, adjectives like “socialist” or “communist” are employed to describe something perceived as outdated, old, underdeveloped, or in poor condition – whether it’s a crumbling building, a poorly maintained space, or a person. For instance, phrases like “It smells like socialism” or “This is so *soc*” are commonly used to convey that something feels stuck in a past era marked by decay and stagnation. Similarly, the discourse surrounding the “communist mindset” is reproduced among young people, often referring to attitudes or behaviours associated with inefficiency and lack of progress. In this sense, the binaries *East–West* and *communism–democracy/capitalism*, where the first part is perceived as backward, whereas the second part as progressive, are reproduced also among young people. However, although they might use terms like “socialist” or “communist” to distance themselves from this past they have never lived in and perceive as outdated or inferior, similarly to the older generation, many young people also do not consider themselves to be fully “European” or belonging to the “West”, but caught in an “in-between”, where they feel neither fully post-socialist nor fully Western. And while for some this is a frustrating state of suspended desire to become truly “Western”, for others this liminality can also be perceived as a unique identity, appreciated, or in some cases even exoticised.

part of broader global processes and the socio-economic inequalities and epistemic hierarchies that shape them (Chari and Verdery 2009, Bodnar 2014).

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 frustration of feeling stuck in the "post-" and with the alternative term "standby transition" – a teleological mindset, characterised with the continuous perception of the transition as "not yet finished" and with the simultaneous Estragonian¹⁹ waiting for a more promising future, often linked with the imagined "West"²⁰ and the state of reaching "true" Europeaness. This thinking mirrors the 1990s visions of the early transitologists for a linear process leading to the establishment of a neoliberal economy, intended to "equalise" Eastern Europe and "the West". Although Bulgaria has already at the beginning of the 2000s institutionalised a nearly ideal-typical form of neoliberal national capitalism, even surpassing some Central European implementations (Bohle and Greskovits 2012), locals continue to envision themselves as perpetually "catching up" without ever fully arriving, while passively attributing responsibility to those perceived as "living in the past". In this context, "standby transition" captures an internalised, recycled version of these developmentalist expectations, creating a pervasive sense of stagnation and entrapment in a state of limbo.

The "standby transition" mindset is well-encapsulated in the metaphor envisioning the Monument to the Soviet Army as the "Bulgarian Berlin Wall". In this imagination the memorial came to be seen as a symbolic obstacle separating Bulgaria from its "normal development", the destruction of which will finally open the way for the awaited European unification. Although this analogy first emerged during the early protests of the Civil Initiative for the Dismantling of the Monument to the Soviet Army (CIDMSA) around 2010, it has periodically regained popularity, first in 2014 amid the Crimea crisis and most recently in 2022 with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the Monument's partial dismantling. As Valentina Marinova, CIDMSA's founder, explained, *"If the Berlin Wall is what separated a country, its people, and its history, turning half the country into a prison, preventing people from escaping to the West... [...] Similarly, the monument divides our society, and now we have the chance to unite around the common values of European belonging and freedom."*

The use of the "Berlin Wall" metaphor is, therefore, illustrative of how in the context of the war in Ukraine Cold War-era epistemic divides have been rekindled and polarised (as seen in the standby transition imagination). Here, while the quest for Europeaness is framed as a rejection of Russian influence, perceived as a lingering imperial force, it simultaneously emphasises the need to break away from a

¹⁹ Inspired by Becket's character Estragon in his play "Waiting for Godot".

²⁰ This term was inspired by Mina Hristova's term "standby migration" crafted to grasp the process of making a 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).

“problematic” past. Thus, in popular discourse, support for Ukraine is almost invariably accompanied by an anti-communist stance. Reflecting on Ukraine’s situation, Marinova continued, *“The war in Ukraine makes it clear that we still have a long way to go to complete the transition. This is evident in the fact that unlike Western Europe, where Ukrainian flags have been ubiquitous since the war began two years ago – appearing on municipal buildings, in train stations, and at airports – you won’t see a single Ukrainian flag in Bulgaria. Here, if a Ukrainian flag appears, someone will remove it. We have not yet matured enough to stand on the side of freedom. Today, freedom means support for Ukraine, because Ukraine is defending its freedom. To be visible, committed to European values, and to European partnerships rather than Russian ones – that is freedom. The monument holds significant symbolic meaning, but removing it alone will not bring democracy to Bulgaria if we don’t grow up for it.”*



Figure 5: CIDMSA action “25 years without the Berlin Wall”, November 9, 2014.
Photo: CIDMSA



Figure 6: “Our Berlin Wall”. 2011.
Photo: Valentina Marinova’s archive

Moreover, this “standby” imagination permeates both everyday and official rhetoric. For example, before the dismantling began in December 2023, a huge banner with the title “Bulgaria’s European Path” covered the plinth of the monument. Put by the Regional Administration (the owner of the monument), it illustrated a tree tracing the country’s history from ancient times through its EU and NATO membership, conspicuously omitting the socialist period (1944 – 1989). At the top of the banner, Bulgaria’s future aspirations – entry into the Schengen Area and the Eurozone were displayed. Quite ironically, the process of the dismantling of the monument in December 2023 coincided with Bulgaria’s admission to Schengen. Even more ironically, while up to now the monument has been only partially dismantled, Bulgaria’s entry into Schengen is similarly incomplete, allowing free access solely for travellers arriving by air or sea, while land border restrictions persist.

As I have shown elsewhere (Koleva 2024: 60–64), similar discourses depicting the envisioned “return to Europe” were also presented in different projects and proposals for the development of the space of Knyazheska Garden. A City Council report from February 2024, initiated by the right-wing town councillor Vili Lilkov, for



Figure 7: “Bulgaria’s European path”. September 2023. Photo: Boulevard Bulgaria

instance, described the dismantling of the monument as a “*significant step toward developing the Knyazeska Garden in a European spirit, transforming it into a lively, modern, and beautiful space*” (Sofia City Council 2024). According to Lilkov, “*The historical development of the garden before 1944 ran parallel to the accession of Bulgaria into European influence and culture and reflected the transformation of Sofia into a European city. But the Intruder [the Monument to the Soviet Army] interrupted this development, which followed the natural European development of Bulgaria [...] The dismantling now would give the opportunity to start over this development.*” (interview April 2024).

Yet, despite the initial exaltation surrounding the dismantling, with the anticipated post-socialist future seeming close at hand, the ritual beheading of the Soviet Soldier and his comrades left behind an empty plinth and fences that ironically, and even more vividly, represented the feeling of incompleteness. By April, four months after the dismantlement began, with the plinth still bare and no official information on when the process would be continued, this exhaustion was captured in my interview with the anti-communist blogger Asen Genov. In contrast to his earlier enthusiastic proclamation that the “Bulgarian Berlin Wall” was “going away step by step”, he now reflected: “*This monument is symbolic of what happened when the communist regime fell in 1989. 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 submachine*

gun. But the plinth remained, the base remained. More or less the same happened on November 10, 1989.” As Tsoneva puts it, paraphrasing Creed (1999: 224), “from a temporal inconvenience, the transition has become permanent” (Tsoneva 2019: 273–4).

*“Guarding” the Memory:
Capturing Alternative Imaginations Beyond Standby*

While the protests against the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia are often framed within the feeling of being trapped in a “standby transition” continuously waiting to move from the “communist” past toward the envisioned “democratic” future – there are voices that complicate this linear perspective. In this section, I will present different clusters of these voices, ranging from the elderly activists’ critique of the post-socialist transition as a disassembly of a path they once valued, a paradoxical instrumentalisation of the anti-fascist rhetoric by far-right groups, and other emerging voices that question the binary frames of the “standby” imagination coming from younger groups and Bulgarian leftist intellectuals.

The first such complication, arising from the elderly representatives of the network of activists defending the Monument to the Soviet Army, unfolds in two main directions – as a defence of the memory of historical anti-fascism, and on the other side – as an appreciation for the socialist modernity that they feel related to. In this context the post-socialist transition is seen not as an unfinished progress toward a more just future, but a failed deviation from a once-promising path that was “dismantled” and the memory of it “erased”. Defending this project of an alternative modernity, they once felt to be part of, they oppose what is viewed, in their words, as the rise of “neo-fascism” and “pseudo-democracy”, marked by a sense of an inability to influence political decisions. In their view democratisation (neoliberalisation), rather than leading to greater freedom and prosperity, has instead led to deepening inequalities, betraying the vision of “good life” they once believed in.

One version of this divergence in perspectives can be illustrated by the story of Grandpa Lenin, an 80-year-old retired engineer and long-term activist fighting for the preservation of the Monument to the Soviet Army. I met him in April 2024, when he showed me a video he recorded during his latest protest. “*What a funny fate,*” he began in the video. “*My brother, a minor, was chained with something much bigger and much more powerful, and I, already an old person, chained myself alone.*” Having slipped through a small gap in the fence surrounding the partially dismantled Monument to the Soviet Army, he tied himself to the empty plinth with metal chains, protesting against the authorities’ refusal to replace the broken plaque honouring Soviet soldiers. “*I sent eight letters,*” he explained, “*begging them to voluntarily put a new plaque on the monument.*” When his requests were ignored, he took matters into his own hands, recreating the plaque with the help of other volunteers.

When I asked why he dedicated so much time to defending the monument, Grandpa Lenin responded with 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 was arrested for stealing guns and sentenced to death, despite being a minor. His mother, desperate to save him, wrote a letter to Tsaritsa Joanna (Boris III's wife), pleading for mercy and to the family's surprise, she commuted the sentence to life imprisonment. However, in June 1944, 18 partisans, were shot by a firing squad. His mother, then pregnant, visited his brother in prison and told him about the killings. Moved by the news, the other prisoners declared, *"Tsvetanke, this baby you carry in your belly, if it's a boy, we'll name him Lenin, even if we get shot, whatever!"* Grandpa Lenin cited their words with excitement. However, as the Red Army approached in September 1944, the prison guards fled, and the prisoners freed themselves. Grandpa Lenin's brother survived, and a Ukrainian officer staying with the family, who had lost his own family to the war, told his mother, *"I will be happy if the child is named Lenin."* „That's one of the reasons I honour and preserve the memory of the Red Army soldiers who gave their lives for the liberation of Europe, for it to be what it is now. This is why I defend the monument, and I will continue to do so as long as I can. Because this is about memory, and it's a disgrace that we are trying to erase it," he further elaborated.



Figure 8: A protest installation, placed in front of the Monument to the Soviet Army during its dismantling, written in red letters reading: “Убийци на памет” [“Killers of memory”] and “Стена на срама” [“Wall of shame”]. December 2023.

Photo: Roberta Koleva

In this sense, for Grandpa Lenin, like for many elderly supporters of the Monument to the Soviet Army, the memorial represents in the first place, as original-

ly intended, gratitude towards the Soviet Army for their role in defeating fascism during World War II. Yet, its significance extends beyond this primary function, encapsulating a broader commemoration of the socialist period itself as a time that shaped their lives and is remembered as a period of justice, equality, and clear purpose. *“In general, I am still convinced that we lived more happily during socialism. We didn’t have computers, I didn’t know what a computer was, but I became an engineer, a creator, I taught students at the university. I had my place. [...] There were no wars, you had brotherly love between people, between nations. Armenians, Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Moldovans treated each other as true brothers,”* Grandpa Lenin continued.

His reflection on the past also carries a critique of the present and the current geopolitical situation. Pointing to the inscription on the monument – “To the Soviet Army, liberator of the grateful Bulgarian people” – he added, *“I once made, in the same letters, the same font, the same colour, a comma and added the words: ‘Who are awaiting their liberation from Western European slavery and American domination.’”* Asked to elaborate, Grandpa Lenin expressed scepticism about Bulgaria’s role within the EU, vaguely viewing it as a façade of participation whereby the country follows externally set agendas by the global elites that are incompatible with local needs – a situation he terms as “pseudo-democracy”.

Echoing this sentiment, Nikola, a 59-year-old representative of the Bulgarian Antifascist Union and the Bulgarian Socialist Party, remarked: *“This is not democracy. Democracy is when the people’s interests are considered so we can all live well. The problem in Bulgaria is that we confuse democracy with the freedom to do whatever we want. True democracy listens to the majority, even if you have your own opinion. Why didn’t they hold a referendum to ask what the people want? Why do a small group of people determine the opinion of all Bulgarians?”* Continuing, Nikola criticised how the EU addresses problems that didn’t exist before 1989, funnelling funds into solving what he views as “artificial” issues in Bulgaria. *“We take the EU money and are told to do something useful. They say, ‘You will work in the direction of gender equality.’ But we’ve long had gender equality in our country. There’s nothing to work for. This is not an interesting topic for us, but it’s interesting for them, so they impose it. Or they focus on ethnic minorities, claiming they are discriminated against. When I hear this, I say, ‘now they are being discriminated; before, they weren’t.’”*

In this context, while the liberal anti-communist narrative frames justice and equality in parallel with the quest for “Europeanness” seen as disintegration from the “totalitarian” past, for Grandpa Lenin and his fellow activists, the “transition towards democracy” represents the opposite – the disintegration of a previous world, associated with greater justice. This disillusionment resonates with broader critiques of the post-socialist transition understood as a top-down process, disconnected from everyday realities, where promises of prosperity have been met with economic inequality and political disempowerment. In this critique, the term “pseudo-democracy” has long been used by figures within the Bulgarian Socialist



Figure 9: Flowers in front of the almost empty plinth. December 2023.

Photo: Roberta Koleva

Party (BSP) to express dissatisfaction with what they view as the superficial nature of Bulgaria's democratic institutions. For example, former BSP leader Mihail Mikov has highlighted how many Bulgarians recognise the existence of a "pseudo-democracy" that doesn't genuinely represent the people's will, critiquing the disconnect between political elites and the general population (see BNT 2015, BNR Horizont 2023a). Likewise, this language has also been adopted by both left- and right-wing actors to critique the broader socio-political environment in Bulgaria, where political decisions are perceived as being out of touch with the public's interests (BNR Horizont 2023b, Androlova 2012). In this sense, much like in Kofti's (2016) observations on the bottom-up use of the term "communist" to criticise po-

litical elites for their perceived unjust affiliations, here, political leaders are similarly critiqued for shaping a system that is thought to be democratic only on the surface.

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 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). However, understanding the subtle emic nuances of the imagined "good life" can also bring analytical potential in the deconstruction of such dichotomies. Maria Todorova (2012), for example, has suggested that "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 lagging behind, nostalgic feelings are a longing for the past that is not overshadowed by negative portrayal. Contrastingly idealising life in the region as economically stable, it can thus serve as a counter-narrative to the images of socialist modernity produced by the West (ibid.) as a divergence from European "progress".

As noted in a study on Poland referenced by Todorova, "what people remember about socialism is a pride in production and in their labour, and also a sense of be-

ing part of a project that was *modern* and directed towards the general good” (ibid.: 70). In this context, the voices of the monument’s defenders complicate the “return to Europe” discourse, central to the “standby transition” imagination, by presenting a struggle for the recognition of an alternative modernity that challenges the orthodox view of modernisation as an exclusively “Europeanisation” project. Just as the “standby transition” links the imagined better life to the spatial ideal of the “West”, this counter-narrative nevertheless constructs its self-imagination in spatial terms²¹. Drawing on the opposing pole of the same Cold War binary axis, which has produced the “standby” imagination, many of my left-wing-oriented interlocutors perceive today’s Russian Federation as a continuation of the brotherly Soviet Union – a former reference point for the “good life” and the inclusive project of alternative modernity they were part of. Thus, although today Russia operates under a regime of “radical neoliberalism” (Yudin 2022), it remains for them a symbolic space that embodies the vision of a past socialist project, standing in contrast to what they perceive as “Western imperialism”.

However, similarly to the utilisation of the word “communism”, the anti-fascist rhetoric can also be instrumentalised in various unexpected ways in the political scene. Quite ironically, one of the most outspoken voices defending the monument since 2022 came from representatives and supporters of the far-right party party “Vazrazhdane” [Revival], whose politics are often accused of being aligned with fascist principles. This sentiment is echoed by many of the members of “The Guardians of Memory”, an association registered in April amid the activists’ legal efforts to stop the Sofia District Administration’s decision to dismantle the monument. Created by Sergei Mahalev, a Russian-born politician in his 50s from “Vazrazhdane”, the association aimed to preserve “the memory of the victory against fascism”, and – to fight, as Sergei explained, against “neo-fascism”. According to him, the government’s decision to remove the monument is part of a larger “neo-fascist campaign” by which “the government forbids people to have their own opinion”. Another example of this neo-fascism, he argued, came during the COVID-19 crisis when the anti-pandemic measures were seen as a neo-fascist attempt of “the elites” to control the population.

Despite the striking contradiction of a far-right party invoking anti-fascist rhetoric, this language was widely utilised among its supporters. It was adopted, much like in the official Kremlin narrative, to explain certain dynamics of the present and to justify contemporary political actions, such as the invasion of Ukraine, as efforts to “de-Nazify” opponents. However, at the same time, the term “fascism” and the anti-fascist rhetoric have been repurposed also by Bulgarian anti-communist liberals to criticise Putin. Jana Tsoneva describes the “unusual revival of anti-fascism” among anti-communist liberal and right-wing groups in Bulgaria, who have embraced a Russophobic version of this rhetoric, conveniently erasing the Soviet

²¹ Philosopher Charles Taylor has noted that “identities in the modern world are increasingly formed in direct relation to others in a space of recognition” typically involving the “members of dominant societies” (1997: 46).



**Figure 10: A left and a far-right party defending the monument together from the plans for its dismantling. August 2023.
Photo: Roberta Koleva**

role in defeating historical fascism. As she shows, this instrumentalisation of the anti-fascist rhetoric is interwoven with anti-communism, which, ironically, is the same frame that Putin uses in his justification of the invasion of Ukraine (Tsoneva 2023: 15).

The examples above, nevertheless, provide only a glimpse into the range of opinions in defence of the memorial, often more vocal in public discourse. While media and public imagination frequently link support for the memorial to pro-Putin sentiments, this is far from the full picture. Since the 1990s, the space around the monument has been a key socialisation spot for youth. Kristina Dimitrova has illustrated how the whole memorial complex became part of the new life that was shaping in Knyazheska Garden after 1989, where younger generations, such as skaters and bikers were hanging out, and where contemporary civic initiatives like the LGBT Pride and Sofia Graffiti festival were taking place, converting it into an anti-ideo-

logical place of “freedom, alternative lifestyles, and anti-consumerism” (Dimitrova 2016). Thus, although the “standby transition” imagination may have influenced young people, for many the monument also symbolises their adolescence and shared experiences in this space. One 18-year-old skater, standing by the skate ramp with a friend, reflected, *“I was very sad when they put all this sheet metal and started removing it. For me, the monument symbolises so many memories and friendships. It’s where I had my first kiss.”* This sentiment highlights how the monument is embedded in the fabric of everyday life, separate from any political connotations. As Dimitrova further observed, ten years ago many young people had thus positioned themselves as defenders in the debate over its removal or preservation (ibid.: 65).



Figure 11: The skaters, among the “permanent residents” of Knyazheska Garden, continued using the ramp during the dismantlement process. April 2024.
Photo: Roberta Koleva

Similarly, when I visited the village of Lozen, near Sofia, where the dismantled parts of the monument are currently stored waiting for their fate to be decided, I encountered a local 50-year-old restaurant worker, originally from Sofia, who expressed a nostalgic connection to the site: *“This is my childhood,”* she said. *“This is where we played. Why are they taking it away from me?”* The same day an elderly woman from the local retirement home proudly showed me a photo from her wedding, taken in front of the Soviet Army monument in Knyazheska Garden in the

1980s. *“It was a tradition to take a photo there at every wedding,”* she explained. This personal connection to the monument, shared by both younger and older generations, reveals how it has also become part of people’s personal stories and everyday experiences.

Alongside these personal narratives, a range of critical voices have emerged, challenging the binary perspectives that have intensified in light of the war in Ukraine. Leftist intellectuals and collectives have defended the monument while simultaneously condemning Putin’s war, rejecting the simplistic dichotomies of pro or anti-Russia. Kolov (2022), for instance, has critiqued sections of the global left for focusing exclusively on Western imperialism while ignoring Russia’s neo-imperialist tendencies. The editors of the left-wing magazine dVERSIA have similarly highlighted how a nostalgic vision of Russia as a successor to the USSR overlooks the country’s anti-communist, anti-labour, and capitalist policies under Putin. They argue that the polarised discourse around the war has stifled nuanced anti-war resistance, reducing the conversation to a binary choice of supporting or opposing Russia – a framework that fails to address the conflict’s capitalist and imperialist dimensions (dVERSIA 2023). Thus, in the continuing quest for “Europeanness” and in expressing solidarity with Ukraine, the liberal discourse is erasing the anti-fascist past, related to the Soviet Union and the socialist period. On the other side, by opposing the epistemic violence of the “West”, the left often downplay the violence of the Russian Federation.

This polarisation has also met resistance from figures like Simon, a writer with anarchist views, whom I met during a leftist book discussion in Sofia. *“If they had removed it in the 90s, I wouldn’t have been ‘sorry’ about it because I’m anti-militaristic. But today, the dismantling has a different meaning – it reflects the growing fascist sentiments in our country.”* He explained the complex and often contradictory attitudes toward the monument, noting that its removal now symbolises much more than just an anti-militarist protest, spurred by the Russian invasion of Ukraine; instead, it is tied to “opportunistic political moves” aimed at legitimising the current political agenda while engaging in historical revisionism. *“There’s been a decades-long campaign to rewrite history,”* he said, *“to pretend fascism never existed here.”* While anarchists, he explained, are unwavering in their commitment to opposing both authoritarianism and fascism “without compromise,” according to him this contrasts sharply with the “allegedly anti-totalitarian” stance of many democratic, liberal, and conservative circles. These groups, he contended, often overlook the more “uncomfortable” aspects of Bulgaria’s past, including the White Terror of the 1920s, the “fascist tendencies” of certain coup governments, and the country’s collaboration with Nazi Germany.

Thus, while liberal narratives often frame the monument’s removal as a step toward “Europeanness” and democratic values, alternative voices – ranging from elderly activists, leftist academics, and anarchists to young people with personal ties to the site – challenge this linear view. These voices complicate the idea of a “stand-by transition”, highlighting emotional and historical attachments to the monument

as a symbol of anti-fascism, socialist modernity, or simply as a personal marker. Despite this diversity of voices, however, the dominant discourse surrounding the future of the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia remains polarised, caught in old binaries, rekindled in a new context. Far-right groups paradoxically adopt anti-fascist rhetoric to justify pro-Kremlin stances, while anti-communist liberals repurpose this same rhetoric in a Russophobic context, often erasing the Soviet Union's anti-fascist legacy. At the same time, leftist intellectuals critique the reductive binaries of pro- or anti-Russia stances, pointing out that such dichotomies overshadow the complex realities of imperialism, capitalism, and historical memory in post-socialist Europe. Meanwhile, the lived experiences of the young generations who gather around the monument reflect how it has transcended its ideological origins, becoming a space for socialisation and personal memory. As different groups mobilise the past to critique the present, the concept of the "post-" becomes a battleground for competing imaginaries: a "stuck" transition yearning for a future that feels perpetually out of reach versus a lost world that offers a counterpoint to the perceived failures of the present. These contested imaginaries underscore the complexity of post-socialist subjectivities and the ongoing struggle to define what a "better life" means in a changing world.

Conclusions and agenda for further research

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 eventually led to the decision for its dismantling in 2023. This paper illustrates that while theoretical discussions have cast doubt on the relevance of the term "post-socialism" (Chari and Verdery 2009, Müller 2019), these recent events prompt a re-evaluation of the concept's significance.

Thelen (2011) identifies the impact of Western preconceived notions about political and economic reforms as a key reason for the diminishing relevance of "post-socialism". However, as Kaneff (2022) points out, people continue to use the temporal distinction between socialism and post-socialism to organise time. This is evident in the discourse surrounding the dismantling of the Monument to the Soviet Army, which has turned into a focal point for reimagining Bulgaria's past, present, and future. Envisioned as the "Bulgarian Berlin Wall", it reflects the long-continuing discursive distinction between "communism" and "democracy", whereby the monument has transformed into an imaginary symbolic wall, an obstacle to the post-socialist transition and the awaited European unification. To scrutinise this frustration of feeling lagging behind and being stuck in the "post-", I proposed the alternative term "standby transition" – a teleological imagination, characterised by the continuous perception of transition that is yet to be concluded, and waiting for a better future, often linked with the envisioned "West" and the state of being truly "Euro-

pean”. In this context although “actually existing” (post)socialism in Bulgaria in the ontological realm is not a horizon of political experience, its epistemic “ghosts” not only continue to serve as a reference point for many but also act as a benchmark for shaping present-day relations and visions of the future.

In this sense, this article demonstrates that despite assertions that there is nothing to “transit” any longer, 35 years after the imagined “end of history” diverse knowledge systems remain trapped by divisions, imagined wall(s), and awaited better futures entrenched in a view of time as progress. These walls are not only Bulgarian, nor are they exclusively “post-socialist”. A question arises of whether they can be considered “post-” at all, for example, post-Cold-War (Chari and Verdery 2009), in a world that continues to be confined by the grand narratives of modernity and inherently binary worldview dominated by opposing forces, where the “end of history” is still anticipated. As Kaneff nicely puts it, the Cold War “continues in a more subtle but nevertheless real form through ongoing expressions of temporal and spatial domination” (2022: 216).

Therefore, an important agenda for future research includes studying such epistemological “walls” and their ongoing impact on local lives as facets of global inequality, where Western-centric visions of progress remain deeply embedded as benchmarks for modernisation (Chari and Verdery 2009, Bodnar 2014, Gallinat 2022a). Overcoming such entrenched binaries – as *West–East*, *Democracy–Totalitarianism*, and *Capitalism–Socialism* (Hann 2014, as cited in Gallinat 2022b: 106) and boosting thinking outside of the “post-socialist condition” (Fraser 2014), requires that anthropological inquiry should continue to explore and extend further the multiplicity of categories, social imaginaries and perpetuating discourses that emerged after the fall of the “real existing socialism”, unpacking their emic usage by both the general public and in the political scene. By examining how communities both internalise and repurpose these discourses, scholars can better understand how imaginaries of (post)socialism interact with new forms of governance, economic reforms, and cultural transformations. Ultimately, as a second step, this agenda encourages a rethinking of the “standby” post-socialist imagination itself beyond a waiting condition, and as a space where multiple visions of past, present, and future converge, allowing for narratives that challenge linear and binary models of progress. By recognising these competing visions, anthropology can shed light on the ongoing struggles to define “a better life” within a world governed by the mixed legacies of historical narratives, positioning post-socialist contexts not as anomalies but as crucial sites for rethinking global social dynamics and the nature of “transition” itself.

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