sciendo

Journal of Nationalism, Memory & Language Politics
Volume 17 Issue 3 • DOI 10.2478/jnmlp-2023-0008

Introduction: Reconsidering "Post-Socialist Cities" in East Central and South East Europe

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The notion of the "post-socialist city" is a widely used interpretative framework for discussing vast number of issues—including, *inter alia*, housing, reconstruction, urban heritage, and sustainable urban development—among a divergent set of disciplines—e.g., architecture, urbanism and urban planning, urban sociology, and anthropology of the city (for an overview, see, for instance, Sýkora and Bouzarovski 2012; Kinossian 2022). Despite its popularity in the research of urban spaces in the East-Central and South East European regions, it has also been subjected to criticism as an umbrella term that arbitrarily brings together a variety of experiences, merging different histories and trajectories of transformation into a false homogeneous whole. There has also been a debate as to whether, 30 years after the events of 1989, the concept of post-socialism is still relevant, or whether it would be better to speak of a neoliberal condition with regard to the process of systemic transformation in Europe (e.g., Chelcea and Druţă 2016).

In this special issue, we postulate post-socialism as a de-territorialized concept that focuses on a specific process or phenomenon, rather than a hegemonic framework that could be applied to define the totality of processes shaping urban space and identity (Tuvikene 2016). Building upon Grubbauer and Kusiak, we consider the coinage of a "post-socialist city" as a *floskel*, especially its application in the two above noted regional contexts. As neatly observed by the two authors, it paradoxically combines the two "seemingly contradictory interpretative schemes" of "post" and "socialist" to create "a substantial hiatus" in urban theory, hence allowing for an inaccurate comparison between the "Western" and "Eastern" European experiences and subsequent *orientalization* of the socialist legacy of the latter (2012). One can argue that

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the changes in the dominant urban planning paradigm further contributed to the solidification of this optics: in the words of Krivý and Ma, postmodern authors had already, by the 1970s, started criticizing urbanism as "totalizing, dangerous, and inconsistent with the spontaneity of individual freedoms," a position which was abetted "by the spread of the 'global post-communism' since the 1990s" (2018).

The above considerations are just an entry point to our initial questioning of the nexus between the urban space, the social, and the various cultural developments in different urban settings. We turn to memory studies for possible hints. Here, the role that space plays in formatting certain memories of the individual and the group was hinted at in the classic works of Halbwachs, Ricœur, and Portelli (more in Gensburger 2020). The space, in this regard, functions both as a model *of* and a model *for* memory, if we may draw on the dichotomy inspired by Clifford Geertz's take on religious symbols. As per Kapralski, who developed this interpretative framework, the spatial setting can both hold certain aspects of past events while also shaping the locals' positioning towards past events. In both cases, it can be mediated by various and different groups (2020). We also acknowledge the growing interest in grassroots practices in the literature dealing with urban histories, processes and identities, which predominantly seeks to complement the reflections relating to the global transformation of cities.

These viewpoints were the major rationale behind the organization of the two-day workshop in June 2021 by the Post-Yugoslav Area Research Center, based within the Institute of Western and Southern Slavic Studies of the University of Warsaw, and the Skopje-based Center for Research of Nationalism and Culture. At the workshop, we discussed various aspects related to the memory of the socialist pasts and the socialist heritage in the cities, the processes of social change and urban space, as well as various aspects of identity and activism in local communities, small towns, and larger urban centers. Ultimately, 18 junior and senior scholars from more than ten countries presented their case studies, but also some examinations of interdisciplinary methodologies and theoretical approaches that referred to different operationalities of the post-socialist city, merged with various local and national idiosyncrasies.

Five articles presented in this special issue are related to the workshop. All authors deploy their reading of the category of post-socialism in their analysis, challenging the aforementioned notion of "post-socialist city" from various standpoints. They discuss the temporal dynamism of bottom-up activism, vernacular memory practices, identity-building and nation branding, as well as the activities and actions of local governments and actors, employing the

spatial aspects of small-town-ness, borderlands and peripherality, and local in-city communities, such as *mesna zaednica* (local community) in the case of Skopje. Local and national particularities, but also common patterns and, in certain cases, cross-national borrowings, are reflected in the different case studies—three from the Czech Republic, one from Poland and one from North Macedonia.

The first article, authored by Robert Kulmiński, deals with the urban traces of memory in Jáchymov, Czechia, and, in particular, memory related to the local German-speaking population and its displacement after World War II. The author argues that the *odsun* (expulsion) of this population group was present in the post-war urbanscape, both before and after 1989; however, there were several critical changes over the years that shifted the dynamics of remembering the population transfers.

The next article, authored by Linda Kovářová, Jan Krajíček and Albert J. Šturma, deals with the legacies of the Iron Curtain site near the Czech town of Aš as a set of individual practices related to the border, as well as the practices of groups, communities, and institutions in the city. The article is based on four years of field research, and it is part of a project sponsored by the European Regional Development Fund.

In his article, Maciej Falski analyzes diverse strategies of building place-identity and town-recognition in the small towns in the region of Zamojszczyzna in southeastern Poland. Drawing on his fieldwork in three towns in the region—Tyszowce, Szczebrzeszyn, and Łaszczów—the author examines the symbolic space and urban memory landscape shaped by the disruptions of cultural and social reproduction under the socialist regime and redefined in the process of systemic transformation. By employing the category of "small town-ness," he identifies and describes the strategies used by external and local social actors and various memory agents in order to (re)build a narrative of the local past in Poland's inner peripheries, where the identity of a place is not specifically defined. As the author concludes, the narrative of the past in the small towns of Zamojszczyzna connects external elements of the redefined nation-state perspective with local heritage linked to the local memories and identities. He also points to the new—capitalist—context of memory, where the possibility of commodifying the past by creating an identity as a brand, a marketable product for external audiences emerges.

The article by Ondřej Daniel deals with the grassroots cultural initiatives in Tišnov, Czechia, in the early 1990s: in particular, an alternative music club, art film screenings and a small art gallery. The author, relying on his interviews with the local activists and an analysis of their private archives, argues that the

social capital and the practices acquired in the late socialism were transferred into the post-socialist realm.

Finally, the legacies of *mesna zaednica* in the district of Taftalidže, Skopje, are examined by Jana Brsakoska, Danica Spasevska, Blagoj Daskalov, and Ilcho Ilievski. The authors focus on the transposal of socialist communal features into the post-socialist architectural and urbanist domains, as well as artistic usages of this notion as a response to contemporary developments in the city.

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