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**VISUALIZATIONS OF THE PAST IN TRANSITION:
MUSEUM REPRESENTATIONS IN HUNGARY, ROMANIA,
AND BULGARIA AFTER 1989**

An all embracing overview of history museums in Eastern Europe during the last five decades uncovers a pendulum-like move: from their role as central instances of ideological and public activities in the socialist period – to a condition of dissolved narratives, unsystematic policies towards their maintenance and function, and lack of public consensus about their meaning. As if marking the bottom of the pendulum curve, the changes of 1989 introduced a dividing line between a state of ultimate embodiment of ideological messages during the socialist times, and a condition where representations, narratives, policies, etc. were swiftly disintegrated, often putting at stake the very existence of the museum institutions. The overturn affected all aspects of museum practice: museum units and departments; collections and exhibitions; topics and discourses; museum functions and public messages. Whereas the previous museums of Party history and the antifascist movement were closed down in all of the socialist countries, the previous ideological exhibitions were dropped from public display and there was a need to invent new modes of museum representation. The wave of accounts about the repressions and the crimes of the regimes in power; the revived attention to historical figures previously considered as “inconvenient” by the ruling ideology; the new emphases in public calendars – all these compelled museums to revise their policies in response to the new public demands. While the newly emerging memories, historical figures and events demanded institutionalization in museum, new notions about the “national past” were in process of elaboration: notions both detached from the previous communist versions, and capable of embracing collective identities beyond the points of divergence.

The goal of the current text is to study the changed meanings and functions of museums in Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria after 1989. Focusing on a set of most representative examples of museum representations in these three countries, the article will explore how these institutions reflected the changes

of 1989, how they dealt with the ambivalences arising in the period of ‘transition,’ and how they developed new narratives of the past in a ‘post-socialist mode.’ The paper will reflect on the major challenges faced at the attempts to represent the recent past in museum forms: the pluralization of memory and the ensuing symbolic struggles; the fragmentary and often unjustified actions for making new uses of the inherited historical and visual material; the attempts for sublimation, displacement, and forgetting of the recent past; the shifting from the memory of socialism to the realm of show business, entertainment and tourism, etc. Taking its launching point from the relationship between memory, institutions, and public space, the article will demonstrate how the museum practices in the three countries faced the crisis of the historical narratives after 1989, and how they responded to this crisis: by a leaning towards nationalism, by discourses of communal martyrdom; by abortive attempts, or a refusal, to supply a historical representation.

A major point in the text is how – in the whirlpool of the political events and shifting historical references – these identity-producing institutions themselves underwent an “identity crisis” and lost a reliable formulation of their institutional profiles. Whether inherited as forms from the preceding period or newly invented, they found themselves in a situation to perform in an unpredictable historical and political setting, and their interaction with the surrounding context resulted in abundant examples of structural negotiation, adaptation, and distortion. Encountering a situation of a continuous change, they were compelled not only to reflect and accommodate the newly emerging discourses about the past, but also to apply models of institutional behavior which often weakened their structural and institutional stability. In a notable way, after 1989 those museums witnessed the lack of state policies about the cultural heritage of the socialist period, the scarcity of funding to carry out museum activities, and the absence of a framing ideological agenda on behalf of the state. They faced these post-socialist challenges utilizing mainly their own human and professional resources, with which in fact they often followed the inertia from the socialist times. These factors not only obstructed the museums’ attempts to cope with the ‘fluidity’ of the past, but determined also their own ‘fluidity’ and ‘indeterminacy.’

Museums and historical representation in post-socialist Hungary

Among the most significant overturns that occurred with the changes of 1989 in Eastern Europe was the multiplicity of histories that exploded after the fall of the socialist regimes. The recourse to the recent past triggered an entire realm of events and memories that reemerged after decades of concealment: remembrance about persecutions and repressions; accounts about the terror

of the 1940s and 1950s, reminders of assaulted national dignity and limited freedoms. The glance back encountered the challenge to respond properly to all this plurality of histories and to accommodate in a negotiable manner the forking paths of truths and interpretations. In Hungary, the revolution of 1956 had an outlining significance; it largely determined the post-socialist approach to the recent past and informed many of the museum initiatives (cf. esp. James 2005; Litván 1996; Nyysönen 1999; Rév 2005). While in the three decades after its crushing the revolution was either spared from mentioning in public discourse or was interpreted as a “counterrevolution” against the socialist order, in the end of the 1980s the demand for breaking the veil of collective forgetting and for a proper commemoration of the victims turned into a cornerstone for the political changes. The renaming of the event to a “revolution” and the reburial ceremony of Imre Nagy and his comrades were culminating moments in the historical reassessment of several decades, and critical points in the overturning of the socialist rule.

The regained legitimacy of the revolution of 1956 gave an impetus to a wave of commemorative forms: hundreds of memorial signs appeared all over the country, emphasizing the notions of valor, martyrdom, and violent oppression. Aside from bridging the temporal gap of the years when the event was curtained in silence, these also sought to construe it as a «common experience,» one that united the nation through the collective memory of fight and suffering in the hands of a foreign enemy (James 2005: 8). The central place of the revolution of 1956 in the post-socialist historical narratives is clearly outlined in its recapturing in new museum exhibitions. As analyzed in detail by Beverly James, among the first post-socialist museum initiatives was an exhibition on the 1956 events which appeared in the Museum of Contemporary History at the end of 1989 (and is currently stored in the National Museum). The display included diverse materials about those days (damaged signs of the Soviet authority, slogans and appeals to arms, newspaper proclamations, photographs), depicting the 1956 events as a courageous endeavor, crushed by military interference. Showing in parallel both the culminating points of the revolution and the images of defeat and tragedy, the exhibition was an opportunity for the Hungarian public to observe primary materials of the 1956 events and to recreate their history as confirmed by previously hidden historical evidence. The exhibition provoked a stream of historical materials about the revolution that appeared in newspapers, books, and TV shows, and had an enormous role in the change of existing historical interpretation through authentic materials from the recent past.

The power of “authentic” objects and visual documentation was reflected clearly in the numerous exhibitions on 1956 that emerged in the following years. Documentary and photo displays about the revolution appeared in museums and galleries all over Hungary, and they formed the core of historical representation in almost every exhibition on twentieth-century Hungar-

ian history. A multitude of archival materials, visual testimonies and objects related to the events of 1956 found their way to exhibition windows, seeking to convey a truth, which had stayed silenced for decades. Aside from finding their place in numerous institutionalized museum forms (state and private, temporary and permanent), many of the traces of the revolution were also turned into museumized reminders within Budapest forming a network of commemorative signs: bulleted walls, memorial plaques, images of banners, and coats of arms, inscriptions, etc. Conveying the drama of the revolutionary days, they served as museum references within the immediate surrounding and dissolved the meanings of the museum in the flow of everyday life. Although many of these references and quasi-museum forms addressed also recipients such as tourists and city visitors, their main function was to evoke examples of rebellious acts and their tragic suppression, and thus to consolidate public memory around moments of the nation's sublime performance and unity. With the gradual diversification of the memory about the revolution (cf. Rainer 2002: 304) and with the new angles of its political appropriation, however, this task appeared as a doomed undertaking. The museumized reminders also started to suffer from exhaustion because of the uni-dimensional nature of the revolution's message. Although still preserving their actuality, they increasingly become capsulated forms that testify mainly to the particular context that engendered them – the first post-socialist years with their stance of opposition to the preceding political rule.

A similar line of exhaustion of its preliminary functions was faced by the museum of monuments (Statue Park) in the Hungarian capital. Located in the outskirts of Budapest, the museum exhibits a series of statues which were previously important markers in the socialist cityscape. Founded within a few years after the changes of 1989, the park bore associations to a graveyard, where the toppled ideological monuments could serve as tombstones to the end of the communist rule. The museum holds, however, little of this implied solemnity and intends to concentrate its functions towards providing an entertaining encounter with the recent past (cf. Plachy 1993; James 1999; James 2005). The highlights of entertainment are in almost all aspects of the museum: in the farce-like exhibition of the statues; in the memorabilia from the socialist period, offered for sale at the museum shop; in the brochures, posters, guides and web sites which all propagate the museum as a “unique” tourist attraction. With the years, the museum provoked a wave of public reaction and debates (about the propaganda techniques used in the museum display, the narrow interpretation of the recent period, the theatrization and commodification of the past) which highlighted the symptomatic lack of consensus about the representation of the socialist times. Having received enormous popularity soon after its creation (mostly with its approach to represent the past in a grotesque manner), the museum witnessed a steady decline of interest with the increasing distance to the socialist times. The limited atten-

tion that it enjoys nowadays (mostly from visitors for whom the socialist past is an inexperienced, fancy, and somewhat “Disney” world) is yet another testimony to the critical state even of a museum institution so radical in its intention to follow the wind of changes.

The above mentioned examples illustrate the void that was opened with the dissolution of the previous ideology, and the need to fill this void with other realms of historical experience and alternative master narratives. On the background of the general neglect or narrow ideological interpretation of topics related to national history in socialist Hungary, the upsurge in celebrations of national history figures and events (Medieval kings, saints and noblemen, early modern historical figures) in the post-1989 period followed as a logical response. Apart from the revived significance of the Hungarian revolution of 1848 after several decades of the relativization of the event (cf. Freifeld 2001; Lampland 1990), the most notable examples of the new interest in national history were the millennial celebrations in 2000 of the founding of the Hungarian state and of the adoption of Christianity. The celebrations included an array of political and cultural activities which animated the visual scene of Hungarian public life with abundant representations of a centuries’ long historical development. Within several years, urban and rural landscapes in Hungary were populated with statues of saints, kings, and royal regalia; castles, historical sites, and state symbols were multiplied in coins, jewels, clocks, etc. Historical and religious scenes, considered emblematic for the Hungarian national identity, became the focus of artistic representations and museum exhibitions.

Among the most exploited images were those of St. Stephen and his crown, which were circulated in a wide range of representations in monuments, paintings, jewels, coins, banknotes, posters and media materials. The crown itself was depicted in carpets, lace, metal and glass, and it also received several separate monuments in stone and bronze (in Szarvos, Hajdúböszörmény, and Esztergom). An important occasion worth mentioning in this array of activities was the transfer of the crown from the National Museum to the Parliament, as part of the Millennium celebrations. Despite the rigorous political debates that this act provoked, the decree that provided for the crown’s preservation and exhibition in the Parliament (and not in the museum) was an indicator also of the enhanced political actuality ascribed to such historical objects, and of the new meanings of the display that political institutions aspired to embody. Apart from being an opportunity for the ruling party to accommodate the national past within its political platform, this act and the celebrations of the Millennium in general testified to a symptomatic revival of a „utopian memory” transmitted by a range of cultural imagery. Monuments and statues, previous historical maps, national celebrations, narratives around historical objects were all factors in mobilizing realms of the past and extrapolating their significance into the present. Deeply nostalgic by nature,

it has its roots both in the relative neglect of the national history during the socialist period, and in some traumatic historical experiences for which the distant past served as a refuge from an „inhospitable” present.

A particular example of the traumatic sense of the past, as evolved in the post-socialist period, is the „House of Terror” museum that has already acquired both international fame and rigorous criticism. Created as a project to visualize the major cases of terror in modern Hungarian history, the museum addresses the periods of fascist and communist rule in the country regarding them as inseparable by their terror techniques. In spite of its self-proclaimed intention for an unbiased review of the oppression during these two periods, however, the museum focuses exclusively on the practices after 1945, turning largely into a history of the communist crimes. At the background of the abundant representations of communist repressions and terror in numerous halls (deportations, religious persecution, imprisonment, political repressions, etc.), the fact that the terror of the 1930s and 1940s is represented in just one hall – and with a scarcity of visual and narrative forms – is no doubt striking. While the Stalinization period, the methods of the communist security organs, the crushing of the 1956 revolution, and the repressions that followed receive abundant representation, the terror of the 1930s and 1940s is limited to a brief overview as if it were a somewhat less significant case. The reasons for this disproportionate representation are frequently explained with the political backing of the project by the right-wing government of Victor Orbán, which created the main legitimating framework to which the museum adheres: the body of the nation had suffered under socialist rule and was revived after decades of terror. The reasons for this disproportion can be seen also in a more general light – as a reflection of an automatic relegitimation (that occurred after the delegitimizing of the socialist ideology) of regimes and practices to which the socialist rule had stood in opposition. In both of these cases, however, whether subduing itself to a political agenda, or following the popular mode of uncritical interpretation, the museum institution is revealed as having dubious legitimacy. The public need to represent the recent past from the stance of opposition, as well as the wide-reaching tracks of the political utilizations of the past, are not only the most serious challenges that the museums faced in the post-socialist context, but also the points where their institutional identity suffered the most serious crisis.

Museums and historical representation in post-socialist Romania

While lacking the centrality of an event such as the 1956 Hungarian revolution, a large share of the post-socialist reconstruction of the past in Romania concentrated on the overthrowing of Ceausescu’s regime and on the com-

memoration of the victims of the 1989 revolution (cf. Gilberg 1990; Ratesh 1991; Siani-Davies 2005). The debates about the proper nature of these events – coup d'état, a popular uprising, or a revolution, etc. were overshadowed by the need to ensure public remembrance of the dead in these events and to sustain a proper interpretation of their being martyrs in a heroic fight against a brutal regime. Special cemeteries for those who died in the street protests were created, and monuments were raised at the central places of the revolution, many streets and squares were named in memory of these events. The scale of the protests, the drama of the street fights, and the numerous people who lost their lives, conferred to the revolution an outlined place in the twentieth-century Romanian history, which (similar to the role of 1956 in Hungary) provided a significant resource to develop a discourse of distance to the socialist past.

This resource of the revolution was promptly grasped in various initiatives to museumize the events of 1989. Visual displays on the dramatic events appeared in most cities where organized protests had taken place. In the capital, the most important places for such exhibitions were the Bucharest History Museum, and the Military History Museum, unique with its exhibition about the role of the army in the overthrow of Ceausescu's regime. Despite the numerous visual narratives about these events, an encompassing exhibition or a museum of the revolution has not been created, and the traces of these events are to be discovered rather in temporary displays or scattered as museumized reminders in the urban setting. Already in the beginning of 1990s, there were organized "guided tours of the revolution trail," including the major sites of the revolutionary events: the Central Committee of the Communist Party building (with the balcony where Ceausescu gave his last speech); the square of the revolution; the bulleted walls of buildings in the city center; the University Square with monuments to the fighting in 1989 and 1990; the Belu cemetery (where those fallen during the revolutionary events were buried), etc. (cf. Light 2001). All these created a network of museumized points in the cityscape that constructed the legacy of the revolution as part of the city heritage (Light 2001: 61) and demonstrated a tourist potential that could be easily exploited in the post-socialist period.

Apart from the divisions along political lines or on issues related to the proper terming of the 1989 events, the overthrowing of Ceausescu's regime (and respectively the decades of Ceausescu's rule) enjoy a relatively unanimous attitude among the Romanian public. This is however strikingly in contrast with the lack of consensus over how to come to terms with the legacy of the socialist period and how to negotiate the painful memories with the historical narratives and visual representations (cf. Deletant 1998; Light 2001; Gallagher 1995). A wide span of opinions appeared on whether to remember (or rather try to forget) about those times and what tools of historical justice to apply. The attitude of denial (as D. Light observes) was palpably expressed in the

widespread reservation towards representing the socialist legacy in museum terms. Probably the most notable example is the one with the House of the People (the huge palace of Ceausescu), used after 1994 for hosting the sessions of the national Parliament and as an international conference center. One part of the building was turned into a museum, but both the reasons of sustaining the financially overburdening building, and the logic of such a museum representation remained unacceptable for many Romanians. The mere preservation of the premises where the Ceausescu family lived in luxury and the exhibition of the riches, with which they were surrounded, did not create persuasive grounds for an engaged distance to the recent past, or for the existence of the museum.

The mode of critical detachment did not appear possible even for the institution that would have as a primary goal the providing of an interpretation on the recent period – the National History Museum in Bucharest. Opened in 1972 on Ceausescu's initiative and reflecting his increasing nationalistic stance in the 1970s, the National History Museum was inevitably turned into a means of glorifying the leader himself. A substantial part of the museum was dedicated to the dictator's achievements and a special exhibition contained the thousands of gifts given to him on birthdays and anniversaries. Although after 1989 the museum put efforts in removing the pervasive ideological representations that suffused its halls before, for the entire period after the changes it did not succeed in arranging an exhibition about the socialist period in the country. The galleries glorifying the communist period and Ceausescu were closed, but the coverage of the museum stopped abruptly in the beginning of the interwar period. After several temporary interruptions of its service, in 2003 all the exhibitions (except those with ancient treasures) were closed and remain under reconstruction until today. The pattern of the National History Museum was shared by the regional history museums in the country where the previous displays of the recent past were dropped, but novel interpretations of the socialist period did not appear.

The attitude of distance applied to the socialist period brought however to a novel interpretation of many historical figures of modern Romanian history – politicians, intellectuals, scholars, etc. (cf. esp. Bucur 2004; Fischer-Galati 1994; Gilberg 1990). Those who were considered in the socialist times as enemies of the socialist ideology were revived in public attention and had their role depicted in a positive light, frequently without a critical evaluation. Among the indicative examples in this respect were the attempts to rehabilitate the figure of Marshall Antonescu, starting the speculations that his repudiation during the socialist period was 'solely' because of his anti-communist persuasion. What caught the public sight in the post-socialist period was not so much the persecutions and crimes that he had conducted during the years before 1944 (all these had been widely narrated during the communist period), but his being in the group of many Romanians who were put on trial and

executed after the establishment of the socialist power. A striking example for this new light on Antonescu from the perspective of the anticommunist stance was the 1994 exhibition at the Military History Museum, organized as part of the celebrations of the end of World War II. In this exhibition, as M. Bucur points out, Antonescu was presented “unproblematically as the most important leader of the Romanian armed forces in the war” (Bucur 2004: 178). Showing Antonescu’s active participation in both military operations and civil events during the war, the museum display remained silent about pogroms and concentration camps in the country under his immediate supervision. Albeit not accepted without reservation by the public, this example is indicative of how the reshaped meaning of the postwar years instigated processes of justification of previously disclaimed public figures; and of how, confused with the shifting grounds of historical interpretation, the museums appeared unable to resist historical revisionism.

While the changes in the national and regional museums comprised a mere closing down of the previous exhibitions, the few attempts for museum narratives about the socialist times were either too small and episodic, or were limited to the first years of the socialist terror and then – to the revolution of 1989. Thus, for example, one of the first attempts to create a museum of communism – in the former Communist Party Headquarters, and currently the Peasant Museum in Bucharest – remained limited to the years of the establishment of the socialist rule and to an exposition of the propaganda machine by the Communist Party. Compressed in a tiny room in the basement and following a didactic approach to the interpretation of the communist period, the exhibition is an ironic evidence of the impossibility to narrate about the socialist period in a distanced and morally detached manner. Albeit focusing on the painful memories of the period (rather than on its grotesque reinscribing), the other example of a museum to the recent past in Romania – the Museum of the Victims of Communism and of the Resistance in Sighet – also falls a victim of this paradox. Opened in 1997, in a building which was formerly used as a communist prison, the museum contains 45 exhibition halls depicting the communist repressions in Romania, oral history and editorial departments (containing thousands of recorded testimonies, memoirs, surveys, etc.). A truly grand initiative to collect documentary and visual traces of the communist repressions, the museum remains limited within a narrow temporal scope: dealing primarily with the Communist terror of the 1940s and 1950s, it shows little inclination to address the Ceausescu period and leaves his rule strikingly unrepresented. As one of the few examples of attempts to museumize the socialist past in Romania, these two museums are indicative of the symptomatic avoidance of the topic of Ceausescu’s rule in museum display, despite the unanimously negative attitude to it in Romania). Yet, they are emblematic also of the confusion that the new discourses faced in the post-socialist times – a confusion between the impetus to depict the

recent period, and the lack of sufficient discursive tools to accomplish this narration.

Museums and historical representation in post-socialist Bulgaria

Unlike Hungary and Romania, who took revolutionary events against the socialist rule as launching moments to develop a discourse of opposition, in Bulgaria such a memory resource was not at an immediate avail. The complicated situation around the overturning of Zhivkov's rule and the limited expressions of dissident activities in the socialist times put the primary attempts in "remembering otherwise" on problematic grounds. A major turning point in the attempts to discover a proper terming of the past was the triggering of the demonological paradigm and the urgent disclaim of the socialist period at the face of its uncovered crimes. Already in the first months after 1989, newspapers, billboards, loudspeakers, etc. were revealing information about the trials of the People's Court, the murdered opponents of the communist rule, and the appalling face of both the Stalinization and the de-Stalinization. Terrifying data was revealed about the conditions in the labor camps where both political opponents and random people were sent (some of these camps continued its existence long after their closing in other countries of the region, cf. Todorov 1999); about the rigor of the nationalization program in the first decade of the regime and its long-lasting harm on Bulgarian agriculture; about the previously hailed industrialization and its damages on the environment, etc. The 'newly revealed' information not merely played the role of shaping the political opinions against the communist party and its political successors, but also of reinscribing public memory after decades of indoctrination.

Some of the major debates around issues of public memory ran around the existing monuments of the socialist past, whose treatment (unlike both Hungary and Romania) was a central point of disputes for a decade after the changes. The reasons for the centrality of the monument topic are various, but probably the major one is rooted in the dominant place that monuments had as ideological emblems in socialist Bulgaria. Almost all the various types (to the Soviet army, to socialist leaders, to antifascist resistance, and the partisan struggle, etc.) were widely represented in Bulgaria and kept on appearing (were still being raised) around the country until late 1980s. Predictably, the period after 1989 witnessed a rigorous opposition against these ideological expressions, bringing many of them to dismantlement, reshaping or reutilization. Among the most contested ones were the monuments of the Soviet Army (most of them remaining preserved), and the mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov in Sofia, which underwent an array of symbolic transformations until its ultimate destruction in 1999. Another set of monuments that also stirred

public energy were those to national historical figures and events which the former ideology had used to position itself in the centuries-long continuity of the nation. The attempts to root out the socialist discourse from the national history framework resulted in clearing the existing monuments from ideological stamps, evoking previously suppressed realms of the past, and raising new monuments to commemorate “all who died for Bulgaria.” Controversies appeared also around the creation of monuments to the victims of the communist repressions. Such monuments started appearing from mid-1990s. Dwelling upon the religious aspects of martyrdom, these emphasized the uniqueness of suffering and insisted on the separate commemoration of the victims – not merged with other historical figures and epochs.

Although presupposing no lesser transformation, the museum discourse in post-socialist Bulgaria did not reach the level of attention that monuments received. Unlike Hungary, where the exhibitions of the 1956 revolution played a crucial role in reshaping the attitudes to the past, the museum representations in Bulgaria remained a relatively marginal topic after 1989. On the contrary, an acute lack of interest to museums of history was observed. While the diverse educational and “mass cultural” activities were swiftly deserted after 1989, the general confusion of what to display in the exhibition sites marked museum practices for more than a decade. One of the few radical steps that were undertaken was the closing of the museums of the Party history and of the anti-fascist movement and the boxing up of the collections that had stayed on show for decades (cf. Vukov 2007). The most representative one among these museums – the Museum of the Revolutionary Movement in Sofia became a desolate place after the closing of its exhibition, and is until today a hot issue of possible reutilization. After a brief use of its rooms for theater performances in 1990s, its building remained empty for years, and only recently parts of it were shared by a bank, private firms, and one of the biggest night clubs in Sofia, club “Taboo.”

The situation did not differ much with the other museums of narrowly ideological profile, which all passed through closing down, dissolution of their previous exhibitions, reassessment, and in some cases – reshaping in new museum forms (such as the Museum of Bulgarian and Soviet Friendship in Sofia, which became a Museum of the Friendship with Russia). The difficulties seemed greater with the history museums of more general profile (national history, regional history, city history, etc.), where the previous ideology had infused all the twentieth century and dropping it from display threatened the coherence of the entire museum. Finding a solution to this uneasy situation was further complicated by the lack of clear idea about what new emphases to put in the context of the dissolved ideological narrative. Many of the previous major events in national history (the partisan struggle, the socialist victory, the role of the Soviet army) faced the need for reevaluation and their meanings remain unsettled until today. Albeit dropped from imme-

mediate exhibition, (the old interpretation of events caused long-term perplexity in museum activities, additionally obstructed by the inertia from the socialist times and the continuing power of the previous narrative schemes. The most unproblematic move in this lack of new histo-riographic models was the recourse to the nineteenth-century liberation struggles or to events and historical figures that were avoided before: World War I and the interwar period, the Third Bulgarian Kingdom, etc.

Despite the noticeable attempts to supply new readings of history, a separate museum of the socialist period did not appear in Bulgaria and few of the documentary materials about the socialist times ever entered museum displays. The several projects that were developed about creating museums of the recent past (museums of fallen monuments in Dimitrovgrad, Sofia, or Haskovo; museums of socialism in Dimitrov's Mausoleum or the Home Monument of the Party on the mountain pick of Buzludja) were aborted after rigorous polemics and due to the lack of public and state engagement. It is especially notable that even at the sites of communist repressions, the newly raised memorial signs were not joined by museum displays. The few expositions about the establishing of socialist power and the first post-war years in regional history museums were of temporary character and did not turn into permanent exhibitions. A salient example of this neglect of the recent past is the National History Museum in which the representation of national history literally stops with the interwar period and there is not even the slightest indicator of an intention to narrate the history of the following decades. Ironically, the primary case of a museum on the socialist period so far is the reopened museum of the socialist ruler Todor Zhivkov in his birthplace Pravets, initiated by his fellow citizens as a marker of his important role in recent Bulgarian history (cf. Vukov 2007)

All these failed attempts for a museum of the recent past in Bulgaria are especially surprising at the background of the examples of such museums in almost all former socialist countries (among which also Poland, Germany, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and even Russia). The speculations about this symptomatic lack can vary between the absence of negotiated discourse on the recent past, the process of collective forgetting about this period, the resistance to museum narratives after decades of their functioning as propaganda tools, etc. The reasons are diverse, but the absence of a clear instance of opposition towards the socialist period apparently played a crucial role. Despite the numerous testimonies, documentary and visual materials about the regime's crimes, Bulgarian society failed to develop notions both of an external or an internal oppressor (as in Hungary and Romania). The image of the period did not consolidate around the one of "terror" and the attitudes to it are still split among the public.

In another paper of mine, I have tried to explain the difficulties of representing the recent past in post-socialist museums through the dissolution of the link between memory and representation (cf. Vukov 2007). Here, I would like to emphasize another important aspect of this impossibility: the crisis of museum institutions in the post-socialist context. As evident from the Bulgarian case, the complicated relationship between remembering and representation in the post-socialist context was influenced in a crucial way by the general absence of a systematic policy for institutional change. New laws and regulations regarding the historical and cultural heritage were produced in post-socialist Bulgaria, but they comprised mainly general reflections on the directions of change, instead of offering practical frameworks for its implementation. On the level of museum units, except from the dropping of the previous ideological formulae, the internal instructions regulating museum practices have remained principally unchanged since the socialist times. The poor financial support of these institutions not merely obstructed the development of more ambitious projects in their premises, but also added its input to the shrinking of museum staff and other human resources. All these factors increased the confusion about the museum's mission in the post-socialist epoch and prompted the emptying of museum forms for people nowadays. The missed opportunity to provide an engaged approach to the past brought to the situation when the discussions and representations of the socialist period occur already mainly on the Internet, which gradually overtakes the role of the museums in representing and interpreting the past.

Post-socialist museums as hybridized institutions

The highlighted variety of examples from the three post-socialist countries reveals the role of museums in the new practices of remembering after 1989. Although the forms and emphases were different in the three countries, the tendencies related to museum representations were largely shared and can be summarized along several main lines. The first one to mention is the steady transition from the univocal ideological regime of representation to a multivocal and pluralistic one, in line with the diversification of memories and the new notions of historical temporalities. The sites of memory and historical representation turned into sites of contest, symbolic fights, and irreconcilable interpretations. They testified to a multiplicity of attitudes to the past (ranging from nostalgia to retribution), to different and incompatible cases in search for an official institutionalization. This posed significant challenges to the functioning of memory institutions and for establishing notions of 'shared' identities beyond the diverging lines. On the level of museum practices, this was materialized in alternating and eclectic actions of both institutionalized and non-institutionalized agents (destruction, refunctionalization, recreation,

leaving unchanged, enclosing in new museum exhibits, replacement, “exile,” etc.). These were all guided by alternating and eclectic arguments: for preserving or contesting truth, for sustaining national dignity or promoting a certain vision about history, etc. The unsolvable public debates that these acts and arguments raised were doomed not to bring to a consensus. On the contrary, what they created was rather confusion about what was worth remembering and what was worth forgetting for either historical, aesthetic, or moral reasons.

Secondly, the performance of these institutions involved a diverse group of social actors: official and non-official culture, museum workers, journalists and intellectuals, political organizations, youth groups, organizations of the repressed, etc. These would insist on destroying or preserving previous collections, would promote decisions on the fate of existing exhibitions, and would claim validity on the logic followed in museum displays. Despite their active involvement, there was a noticeable heterogeneity and incommensurability of the actors – they did not argue and react on one level, but depending on their different positions and means of involvement in the public debates. This revealed not only the public response that representations of the past received in the period of transition, but also the non-institutional and extra-institutional calls for elaborating institutional policies on history’s visualization. Despite the gradual withering of the interest towards museum representation of the recent past (as can be observed in all the three countries), the first decade after 1989 revealed the institutions of memory as targets of symbolic battles between opposite public discourses and objects of debates addressing institutional change.

This third point to make is related to the difficulties of construing a coherent narrative about the socialist period. Truly, the role of these institutions of memory in the construction of a distance to the recent past is undeniable and it was manifested in a variety of ways (nostalgia, ironic games, withering of the confrontation, etc.), it was visible both in the refusal to narrate about the past (due to the resonating link between exhibition and propaganda of the socialist times), and in the moral evaluation of the period – often failing to carry out a dialogue with the complexity of memories about this epoch. At the place of the decomposed ideological narrative, a new and all encompassing one did not appear in any of the three countries. This not only led to a “sense of disorientation” (Verdery 1999: 35) and confusion in the first years after the changes, but also prevented the appearance of a coherent narrative about the socialist times in the long run. The most plausible option in the attempts to overcome this was connecting the history of resistance against the regime with the new versions of national history. Still, in spite of its resources for an alternative interpretation, it revealed the empty form of the totalizing narrative: what was before occupied by the communist narrative was threatened to be overcome by the nationalist one. In their turn, the attempts to dissociate

symbolic national events and historical figures from the previous communist uses (paralleled with the introduction of new events and figures in the national history frameworks) brought the need for a total rethinking of the national narrative, sometimes putting at stake the very idea of its coherence. In fact, although numerous signs about the “new past” emerged (related mostly to the victims of communism), there is a palpable lack of an encompassing narrative about it. To put it in other words, the signs of the past remained in a scattered, disorganized and fragmented state, and any principle of their possible arrangement is still missing in the three countries.

All this gives grounds to the point about the identity crisis of the institutions, which are supposed to supply identity and solidarity through the idea of a shared past. In the post-communist period, the old institutions dealing with historical memory were left without an ideological agenda and without the necessary support for their proper functioning. Representing controversies and welcoming debates about possible solutions, they turned into focal points for interventions of other institutions aimed at their possible ‘normalization.’ Frequently accused of failing to perform their public mission, they have been targets of appeals for undertaking new policies for their regulation. The core of the crisis of these memory institutions after 1989 lies mainly in the nature of their forms, inherited (and thus, as if “imported”) from the socialist times, and consequently largely “alien” to the post-socialist context. During this crisis, the institutions of memory encountered new public expectations and a changed social function: they were supposed to respond visually to the political transformations and to express new pluralist and divergent civic identities. The attempts to make the old museum forms functional faced, however, both the resistance to their previous ideological appropriation and the uncertainty about what new principles to apply in their representation. The tension was furthermore enhanced with the pressure to embrace a line of the commodification of the past, i.e. to turn its traces into objects of tourist entertainment and show business. While the reluctance to subdue to this tendency doomed many museum units to a resistance against the option for a thorough change in their exhibition policies, the initiative to embrace a radical stance towards the recent past (as revealed in the case of the Budapest Statue Park) faced controversies, disapproval, and a gradual decrease of interest. Thus, from an institutional point of view, instead of being primary institutions of sustaining ‘coherent’ and ‘negotiated’ collective images of the past, museums actually appeared to be, firstly, among the most unstable forms of the transition period; and, secondly, among the identity forms that suffered the heaviest blows on their own identities.

The crisis of the identity-producing institutions was vivid also in the debates around their change that showed the symptoms of insufficient institution-ization (understood here as habituality and routineness of the practices, their unproblematic automatization, the organized and schematic) procedure

for solving problems. In a situation when institutions which are supposed to provide a solution, undergo a crisis, the problem acquires an acute character, attracts the public opinion and is a center of public debates. If public opinion forms a consensus, it can exercise pressure on the executive power and thus facilitate the formation of new institutions that would begin routinizing and automatizing the solution of the problem, making it thus publicly invisible. But, as we could see in many of the aforementioned examples, the public opinion has been divided and generally unable to reach a consensus. In the few cases when such a consensus was established (as with the 1956 revolution in Hungary and the attitude to Ceausescu's regime in Romania), it turned into a stance that shaped the entire recourse to the recent past. Even then, however, the input of museum institutions appears unpredictable – ranging from abundant representations (as in Hungary) and restraint from representation (as in Romania). In the cases of institutions that cannot automatize themselves and cannot routinize their institutional identity, the role of public opinion and “local” cultural interpretations appears as bearing crucial importance.

In response to the crisis that they faced, the three countries witnessed a wide range of para-institutional ways of dealing with the institutions of memory. Among these, one can list: state supported dissemination of fragments about an “uncontested” past (such as events and myths from ‘national history’); relatively independent institutions enacting new practices depending on the visions and ambitions of their staff; extra-institutional struggles related to conflicts around existing museum sites, etc. A separate place in these para-institutional steps hold also party actions that seek to present themselves as undertaken by institutions that are neutral to political fights, but are customarily guided by the parties in power; as well as actions of regional institutions who support a certain party line. Not least, among those steps are also private actions for creating or sustaining museums, which reflect the personal visions of the sponsor; network initiatives, supported by the European Union or other international organizations; and a subtle displacement of the institutions of memory with some forms of memory's marketization. These various para-institutional actions conditioned the creation of numerous museum-like initiatives (at both official and informal level) that took the model of museumization and applied it in actions that had little to do with a historical visualization of the past. Preventing the overcoming of the institutional crisis, the post-socialist context rejected the ‘purity’ or ‘fixity’ in their representation and created constellations of their hybrid versions.

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