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**INCONVENIENCES OF MEMORY.  
THE MONUMENT TO THE SOVIET ARMY  
AND GEORGI DIMITROV'S MAUSOLEUM  
IN SOFIA AFTER 1989**

**Abstract**

The paper discusses the transformations of memory caused by the preservation, removal or redefinition of memorials. These transformations indicate the competition between political and ideological views in Bulgarian society after 1989. Two cases are analysed: the deconstruction of Georgi Dimitrov's already-empty mausoleum in 1999 and the Monument to the Soviet Army, still standing in Sofia. Both instances are significant indicators of power constellations, which, in the second case, also have a precise foreign policy dimension (relations with Russia). The periodically activated debates, especially concerning the Monument to the Soviet Army, indicate the absence of a coherent memory policy and general ambiguous attitudes in Bulgarian society towards the communist past.

**Keywords:** collective memory, memory policy, communist past, monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia, Georgi Dimitrov's mausoleum in Sofia

I

More than thirty years after the collapse of communism, there is no consensus in Bulgarian society over the regime's historical and moral assessment. This is reflected in the absence of a consistent memory policy towards the totalitarian era, which undermines both the value system of the society that claims to be a democratic one and the trust in authorities and their decisions.

The interconnectedness between history, memory and political power is used in this paper as a frame to show how Bulgarian society deals with its past under communist rule and its memorial heritage without being guided by a coherent memory policy. After a short

introduction, I briefly overview some characteristic features of the Bulgarian debate about the recent past. Next, I use the cases of two memorial sites to demonstrate two opposite approaches to commemorating communist history, which also directly impact the cityscape.

## II INTRODUCTION

Understanding memory as a symbolic and structural power means that it is a crucial factor in legitimising both domestic and foreign affairs policies.<sup>1</sup> Negotiating a consistent narrative about the past is a political matter in itself, a subject of history and memory policy. Such policy intends to make “the meaningful connection between past, present, and future, which is often coupled with a reference of action”.<sup>2</sup> The highly complex interdependence between history, memory, individual and collective self-identification, ideological orientation, political and economic connections is pivotal in forming memory policy. And vice versa – once conceptualised, memory policy aims to intervene in this interplay, controlling its trajectories and intensity.

The public debate about the recent past is constructed from the perspectives of three main groups – historians, witnesses and politicians. Different – even opposite – interpretations compete within each of these groups. Their ‘mass personal memory’<sup>3</sup> is the resource and the challenge for the concept of collective memory as “the organisational principle that nationally conscious individuals use to organise the national history”.<sup>4</sup>

In this perspective, the question is not if the image of history communicated is scientifically truthful. Instead, the crucial factor is

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<sup>1</sup> Jan-Werner Müller, ‘Introduction: The Power of Memory, the Memory of Power and the Power over Memory’, in Jan-Werner Müller (ed.), *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past* (Cambridge, 2004), 1–35, here 25–6.

<sup>2</sup> Erik Meyer, ‘Memory and Politics’, in Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (eds), *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (Berlin–New York, 2008), 173–80, here 176.

<sup>3</sup> In Timothy Snyder’s opinion: “the personal recollections held by enough individuals to have national significance”. *id.*, ‘Memory of sovereignty and sovereignty over memory: Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine, 1939–1999’, in Müller (ed.), *Memory and Power*, 39–58, here 49.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

how and by whom, through which means, and with which intention and effects past experiences are brought up and become politically relevant. By defining ‘politics of history’ as a political domain – where different actors not only seek to provide history with their specific interests but also use it for their political benefit – (Edgar) Wolfrum (German historian) follows the pejorative use of the term: It often serves to mark a political-instrumental way of dealing with history and historiography which aims to influence contemporary debates. In this perspective, ‘politics of history’ is a matter of public political communication, primarily in the mass media.<sup>5</sup>

As Jan-Werner Müller pointed out:

... contested, conflicting, and competing memories are an inevitable legacy of transitions to democracy. But that in itself might not be such a bad thing. After all, democracy is a form of contained conflict – and as long as memories remain contested, there will be no simple forgetting or repression *tout court*. Rather than aiming for some elusive thick social consensus in which one narrative of the past is enthroned, arguing about the past within democratic parameters and on the basis of what has been called an ‘economy of moral disagreement’ might itself be a means of fostering social cohesion.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, the ambiguity of the moral attitude towards and of the memory of dictatorship is highly problematic, precisely because it affects the social cohesion and the democratic self-definition of a society. Regarding the two totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, the memory policy remains unbalanced not only in Bulgaria but in Europe as well. Despite several declarations and resolutions of the European Parliament,<sup>7</sup> the narrative about communist rule in the states of Central and Eastern Europe is not as strongly binding as the policy regarding National Socialism.<sup>8</sup> Civil organisations, political actors and a number

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<sup>5</sup> Meyer, ‘Memory and Politics’, 176.

<sup>6</sup> Müller ‘Introduction’, 33.

<sup>7</sup> Resolution 1481 of the Council of Europe (2006), Prague Declaration on European Conscience and Communism (June 2008), European Parliament resolution on European Conscience and Totalitarianism (2009), European Parliament resolution on the Importance of European Remembrance for the Future of Europe (2019).

<sup>8</sup> See Daniela Decheva, ‘Der Schatten des Eisernen Vorhangs: Europäische Erinnerungspolitik 30 Jahre nach der friedlichen Revolution’, *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen*, 5 (2020), 55–66.

of European intellectuals and researchers (such as Jorge Semprun, André Glucksmann, Zygmunt Bauman, Aleida Assmann and many others) have pleaded for overcoming this asymmetry for decades.

### III

#### THE POST-COMMUNIST DEBATE IN BULGARIA

In the years of transition, post-communist societies used different strategies to rewrite their national self-definition in a new, democratic context. They were rejected as hostile to national identities and interests. As Ivan Krastev pointed out, “appealing to national sentiment was critically important as a way of mobilising society against the communist regimes”.<sup>9</sup> In Bulgaria, this interpretation still encounters the persistent resistance of former communist elites that remained central actors in economic and political life after the changes of 1989. More than thirty years after the regime’s fall, they have not expressed a clear and convincing public condemnation of communist repression – “the Bulgarian former communists chose to ignore the European demands”.<sup>10</sup>

The ideological orientation of political powers is reflected in the concepts they use to redefine the post-socialist self-understanding of Bulgarian society through commemorative practices. The conflicting interpretations of the recent past do not allow for developing a nationally significant collective memory of it. Most commemorative initiatives about the victims of the communist regime have come from civil society.<sup>11</sup> Some of them were institutionalised but were still unable to achieve national significance and popularity, such as 1 February, the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Communism in Bulgaria,<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ivan Krastev, ‘Central Europe is a lesson to liberals: don’t be anti-nationalist’, [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jul/11/central-europe-lesson-liberals-anti-nationalist-yugoslavia-poland-hungary?CMP=share\\_btn\\_fb](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jul/11/central-europe-lesson-liberals-anti-nationalist-yugoslavia-poland-hungary?CMP=share_btn_fb), [Accessed: 5 Dec. 2022].

<sup>10</sup> Claudia-Florentina Dobre, ‘Uses and Misuses of Memory. Dealing with the Communist Past in Postcommunist Bulgaria and Romania’, in Małgorzata Pakier and Joanna Wawrzyniak (eds), *Memory and Change in Europe. Eastern Perspectives* (New York, 2016), 299–316, here 312.

<sup>11</sup> Dobre, ‘Uses and Misuses of Memory’, 308.

<sup>12</sup> The celebration (which began in 2011) was suggested by the ex-presidents Zhelyu Zhelev and Peter Stoyanov.

or 23 August (the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop-Pact), which the European Parliament proclaimed as the European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, many local communities have preserved – with or without recontextualisation – the memorials of communist antifascist fighters or partisans.<sup>14</sup> Decisions about what to do with the monuments from the socialist era are made by local authorities who try to avoid conflicts rather than follow a more or less clear memory policy. As Dobre puts it, “in Bulgaria, the public space finally accommodates both communist and anti-communist memory”.<sup>15</sup>

In the Bulgarian post-socialist context, two approaches towards memorials are represented: First is their destruction and removal from the public space as a demonstration of a definitive break with the communist past and a socially-binding moral and political catharsis. Second is the preservation but desacralisation and redefinition of memorial sites.

As the capital and the largest Bulgarian city, Sofia has a pivotal significance for dealing with socialist monuments. Memorials are materialisations of the memory and identity of the community, affecting the urban space. The cases of two of these monuments are especially representative of the absence of consistent memory policy since the changes of 1989: Georgi Dimitrov’s Mausoleum and the Monument to the Soviet Army. The latter still stands in the city centre, and the former was demolished in 1999. This demonstrates the ambiguous attitudes in Bulgarian society towards the communist past and generally of the interconnectedness between memory and political power. During the socialist period, they served the ideological needs of the authorities and emphasised the dependence on the Soviet Union. After 1989, different groups in society projected their attitude towards political decisions on them – such as support, resistance, irony for the weakness or (overt or covert) dependences of authorities. While

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<sup>13</sup> European Parliament resolution on European conscience and totalitarianism, 2 Apr. 2009, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/presse/pr\\_info/2009/EN/03A-DV-PRESSE\\_IPR\(2009\)04-01\(53245\)\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/presse/pr_info/2009/EN/03A-DV-PRESSE_IPR(2009)04-01(53245)_EN.pdf) [Accessed: 5 Dec. 2022].

<sup>14</sup> See Даниела Колева, ‘Нашите герои и техните паметници: два казуса от Югозападна България’, <https://www.seminar-bg.eu/spisanie-seminar-bg/broy15/681-nashite-geroi-i-tehnite-pametnitsi.html> [Accessed: 5 Dec. 2022].

<sup>15</sup> Dobre, ‘Uses and Misuses of Memory’, 312.

Georgi Dimitrov Mausoleum is primarily relevant for the domestic debate about the communist past, the Monument to the Soviet Army still has a crucial significance for relations with Russia.

#### IV GEORGI DIMITROV'S MAUSOLEUM

Georgi Dimitrov Mausoleum in Sofia was built in only six days, immediately after his sudden death in Moscow on 2 July 1949. For decades, the embalmed body of the 'leader and teacher of the Bulgarian people' (as he was glorified during socialism) was displayed for veneration – just like that of Lenin in Moscow. It was on the platform of the Mausoleum that the communist leaders greeted passing demonstrations on official holidays. This quasi-religious worship combined the totalitarian personality cult with the symbolic immortalisation of the communist idea and gave additional legitimation and political strength to the regime.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the Mausoleum became one of the main symbolic materialisations of ideology and communist domination in the cityscape of Sofia.

In 1990, Dimitrov's body was buried; over the next decade, many suggestions were discussed on how the empty mausoleum could be reused, but no final decision was made. In the summer of 1999, the government of the Union of Democratic Forces promptly made the decision and demolished it. This act of *damnatio memoriae* aimed to demonstrate the unconditional and irreversible break with communism and to provide symbolic capital and political legitimation to the anti-communist party. Yet, this attempt to erase the symbol of ideological domination from public memory was strongly criticised.

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<sup>16</sup> See Eliza Stanoeva, 'The dead body of the leader as an organizing principle of socialist public space: The mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov in Sofia', <https://www.iwm.at/publications/5-junior-visiting-fellows-conferences/vol-xxix/elitza-stanoeva-2> [Accessed: 5 Dec. 2022]; Елица Станоева, 'В крак с времето: два паметника на социализма в собственото им време', in Милена Якимова, Петя Кабакчиева, Марина Лякова, and Вероника Димитрова (eds), *По стъпките на Другия: сборник в чест на Майя Грекова* (София, 2014), 240–52; Dobre, 'Uses and Misuses of Memory', 306–7; Mariya Ivancheva, 'The Fall of Socialism, the Mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov in Sofia and the Berlin Wall', [https://www.academia.edu/1470794/The\\_fall\\_of\\_socialism\\_the\\_Mausoleum\\_of\\_Georgi\\_Dimitrov\\_in\\_Sofia\\_and\\_the\\_Berlin\\_Wall\\_compared](https://www.academia.edu/1470794/The_fall_of_socialism_the_Mausoleum_of_Georgi_Dimitrov_in_Sofia_and_the_Berlin_Wall_compared) [Accessed: 5 Dec. 2022].

It was interpreted as a personal “allergic rejection of the recent past”<sup>17</sup> by the then minister of planning and reconstruction. But more importantly:

Taking place almost ten years after the fall of socialism as state ideology in Bulgaria, the ‘urgent’ destruction of the mausoleum was actually both late and untimely. The destruction came after years of public debates and demands for destruction, but the decision for it was actually not a result, nor a response to these debates. Having overstepped by several years the rise of public pressure for removing this communist symbol from the center of Sofia, the destruction failed to meet the boiling point of purging energies, and did not succeed to consolidate around a publicly accepted self-representation. Neither the fact of annihilating one of the most visible forms inherited from the socialist epoch, nor the former royal garden that was recovered in the stead of the empty terrain managed to convince the public about the justification and usefulness of this destruction.<sup>18</sup>

The destruction of the building freed the space and symbolically reconnected the former king’s palace, now the National Art Gallery, and the city park of the National Theatre – two representative locations of pre-communist Bulgarian urban and political culture. The empty place is occasionally used for artistic projects but is not unified as a durable and recognisable conception. So, twenty-two years after the demolition, it is still widely called ‘the place of the Mausoleum’.

## V

### THE MONUMENT TO THE SOVIET ARMY

The story of the Monument to the Soviet Army is quite different. The decision for its construction was made by the temporary municipality of Sofia in 1946; the national government confirmed it in 1949, and construction began in 1952 and finished in 1954.<sup>19</sup> The vast monument and the ample space around it are situated in the very centre of Sofia

<sup>17</sup> Nikolai Vukov, ‘Refigured Memories, Unchained Representations. Post-Socialist Monumental Discourse in Bulgaria’, in Ulf Brunnbauer and Stefan Tröbst (eds), *Zwischen Amnesie und Nostalgie. Die Erinnerung an den Kommunismus in Südosteuropa* (Köln, 2007), 71–86, here 80.

<sup>18</sup> Nikolai Vukov, ‘Emergent Reinscriptions and Dynamics of Self-Representation. Socialist Monumental Discourse in Bulgaria’, [www.kakanien-revisited.at/beitr/emerg/NVukov1.pdf](http://www.kakanien-revisited.at/beitr/emerg/NVukov1.pdf) (2006), 4 [Accessed: 5 Dec. 2022].

<sup>19</sup> See Даниела Колева, ‘Памятник советской армии в Софии: первичное и повторное использование’, *Неприкосновенный запас*, ci, 3 (2015), <https://www.nlobooks.ru/>

between the University Rectorate and the Prince's Garden, renamed 'The Park of Freedom' during socialism. The monument was meant to symbolise the loyalty and the gratitude of the Bulgarian people to the Soviet Union for liberating them from the 'fascist' regime<sup>20</sup> and leading them to a bright communist future. Yet, in the frame of socialist ideology, a connection was made between the 'first' liberation (from the Ottoman Empire, 1879) and the 'second' one (from the Bulgarian 'fascist regime collaborating with the Third Reich', 1944). The strong Russophile tradition in Bulgaria, the shared Orthodox religion and the linguistic and cultural similarities were misleadingly used as a historical foundation of the total political and economic dependence on the Soviet Union.<sup>21</sup> The Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia is a gigantic representation of this submissiveness.

Unlike the mausoleum, the monument cannot be used for other purposes. Since 1989, its future has been discussed with varied intensity without any conclusive decision until now. In addition, any decision about the monument has significant foreign policy implications. For decades, right-wing, anti-communist and pro-European politicians and intellectuals have argued that this symbol of Soviet occupation and dominance, and Bulgarian submissiveness, is unacceptable. They insist that the monument must be removed and reinstalled in the Museum of Socialist Art on the periphery of Sofia. An initiative pleading for dismantling the memorial was launched in 2010 [www.demontirane.org]. The leftist opponents of this position, orbiting the ex-communist party and Russophile organisations, argue that the monument symbolises the fraternal, historical and civilisational connectedness between Bulgaria and Russia, not decades of Soviet domination. Since the accession of Bulgaria into the EU, these left-wing

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magazines/neprikosnovennyi\_zapas/101\_nz\_3\_2015/article/11517/ [Accessed: 5 Dec. 2022].

<sup>20</sup> The ideologised Bulgarian historical narrative during socialism used the term 'monarcho-fascism' for the rule of king Boris III after the coup on 19 June 1934. This term was used to define the activities of the communists, both before and after 1944, as anti-fascist. In current Bulgarian historical scholarship, the notion of a 'fascist regime' in the 1930s is largely rejected.

<sup>21</sup> See Мирела Велева-Ефтимова, 'Завръщането на България в Европа – под сянката на русофилската традиция' [The Return of Bulgaria to Europe – Under the Shadow of the Russophile Tradition], *Социологически проблеми*, xlix, 1–2 (2017), 186–208.



circles have been trying to recontextualise the memorial site, combining the celebration of 8 May, 'Victory Day' as it had been commonly known during the communist era, and in Russia, until now, with Europe Day on 9 May. Yet, they also persist in commemorating 9 September – the day in 1944 when the communists took power in Bulgaria with the support of the Red Army. The resistance of the ex-communist party and its supporters against the relocation of the monument and the vocabulary they use to defend it, confirms its all-important and controversial symbolic significance. In May 2021, when the celebrations of Victory Day/Europe Day activated the debate again, the Sofia department of the Bulgarian Socialist Party publicised a declaration which stated:

This monument was, is and will remain that value of the Bulgarian spirit and conscience – the memory of the feat of the victorious army in World War II. It warns us of what fascism and neo-fascism can do. It calls us to defend world peace ... Possessed by a wild Russophobia and nostalgia for Bulgarian fascism, these individuals called for the relocation of the Monument to the Soviet Army at a special press conference. They hoped the ongoing global campaign against the Russian Federation would help them carry out their anti-Bulgarian act.<sup>22</sup>

Over the past decade, the monument was repeatedly used as a canvas for political messages in several anonymous spray-painting episodes, which provoked conflicting reactions, as expected. While some approved of those incidents as creative, authentic, juvenile expressions of political positions, others condemned them as vandalism and desecration. Beyond any political or aesthetic considerations, some of these activities have – intended or not – multilayered commemorative implications. For example, the painting of the monument pink on 21 August 2013 and the inscription in Czech *Bulharsko se omlouvá!* [Bulgaria apologises!] were an expression of regret for the Bulgarian participation in the violent suppression of the Prague Spring exactly forty-five years earlier. At the same time, the anonymous artists probably referred to the projects of the Czech artist David Černý and the Prague protesters themselves.<sup>23</sup> Still, the material bearer of this

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<sup>22</sup> БСП брани Паметника на Съветската армия с декларация, [debatl.bg/bsp-brani-pametnika-na-savetskata-armia-s-deklaratsia/](http://debatl.bg/bsp-brani-pametnika-na-savetskata-armia-s-deklaratsia/) [Accessed: 5 Dec. 2022].

<sup>23</sup> Marnix Beyen, 'Introduction: Local, National, Transnational Memories: A Triangular Relationship', in Marnix Beyen and Brecht Deseur (eds), *Local Memories in a Nationalizing and Globalizing World* (Basingstoke, 2015), 13.

'transfer of memory' is the monument, with its symbolic foundation: the power of the Red Army and Soviet domination, with its far-reaching and long-lasting historical, political and cultural consequences. This is an example of how the "transgression of boundaries imposed by the deliberate monument" also turns it into a counter-monument.<sup>24</sup>

The foreign-policy significance of the monument was illustrated well by the formal protest of Russian diplomats on these occasions. According to recently publicised information, the Russian ambassador in Bulgaria has offered the city to renovate and maintain the monument in exchange for being given perpetual and free use of the surrounding area.<sup>25</sup> These reactions demonstrated Russia's unambiguous claims to intervene in Bulgarian memory interpretations.

While, over the last thirty years, Bulgarian authorities have failed to decide what to do with the monument and keep using it in symbolic and ideological controversies, the large space around it is used by citizens for walks, gatherings, biking, skating, and public events. The generations which have no personal experience, either with socialism or with the actual post-socialist transition, do not seem to be especially disturbed by the impressive dimensions and historical message of the monument. Over the years, they have spontaneously neutralised its ideological radiation. This symbolical redefinition also changed the gravity of the monument in Sofia's urban space and culture. Yet, its conservation "raises the questions of *whose* cultural significance will be preserved, and who will be *disinherited* as a consequence".<sup>26</sup>

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the monument once again immediately became a scene of opposing political views and reactions. The procedure for its removal was renewed. A few teenagers expressed support for Ukraine with spray paint on the monument and were under arrest for more than twenty hours. The opposition party, GERB, strongly criticised the actions of the police.

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<sup>24</sup> Mia Agova, 'The Politics of Conservation: #ДАHCing and Romancing the Soviet Army Monument in Sofia', [www.academia.edu/5385736/The\\_Politics\\_of\\_Conservation\\_%D0%94%D0%90%D0%9D%D0%A1ing\\_and\\_Romancing\\_the\\_Soviet\\_Army\\_Monument\\_in\\_Sofia\\_Bulgaria](http://www.academia.edu/5385736/The_Politics_of_Conservation_%D0%94%D0%90%D0%9D%D0%A1ing_and_Romancing_the_Soviet_Army_Monument_in_Sofia_Bulgaria) (2013), 65 [Accessed: 5 Dec. 2022].

<sup>25</sup> [www.mediapool.bg/oblasten-upravitel-na-borisov-glasyal-da-dade-bez-vazmezdno-na-moskva-pametnika-na-savetskata-armiya-news327209.html](http://www.mediapool.bg/oblasten-upravitel-na-borisov-glasyal-da-dade-bez-vazmezdno-na-moskva-pametnika-na-savetskata-armiya-news327209.html) [Accessed: 5 Dec. 2022].

<sup>26</sup> Agova, 'The Politics of Conservation', 67.

At the same time, the Bulgarian Socialist Party, now a part of the government coalition, promptly organised the cleaning of the monument and again expressed their position in favour of its preservation.

## VI CONCLUSIONS

After the collapse of the communist regime, both Georgi Dimitrov Mausoleum and the Monument to the Soviet Army were irreversibly desacralised. Despite the opposing approaches towards them, they represent turning points or even ruptures in the trajectories of the collective memory of the socialist era in Bulgaria. They also demonstrate that unless embodied in a coherent memory policy, the removal or preservation of a given memorial remains an ideological idiosyncrasy and is easily instrumentalised in the political arena. It is highly problematic when historical facts and their moral evaluation remain governed by political considerations. Therefore, it is crucial to underline that: “The memorialisation of history is at the same time its moralisation, and the stakes of historical inquiry are no longer *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, but the mobilisation of memory to stake out moral claims”.<sup>27</sup>

Memorial sites are the materialisation of those moral claims in the cityscape. Being part of the public space, they are meant to represent the shared values of society, not personal memories, attitudes or interpretations of the past. How far can heterogeneous, potentially opposing memory narratives go without putting the value basis of a democratic society in danger? So, common respect for them must fit a frame drawn by a clear and convincing memory policy. It seems that no such memory policy in Bulgaria is possible until the historical and ideological heritage of communist rule remains ambiguous in its assessment. Recontextualisation, i.e. desacralisation of totalitarian memorials, allows for their preservations but necessarily ideologically invalidates them. The latter is crucial – otherwise, they can function as a subversive way to tolerate and reproduce undemocratic values and attitudes.

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<sup>27</sup> Müller, ‘Introduction’, 19.

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